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AMERICAN LITERATURE IN  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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*ENGLISH LITERATURE*

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# AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*by*

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## PREFACE

PART of the material of this book was prepared in Switzerland. A good deal of the information given in this study is, however, based on notes made on the occasion of a visit to the United States in 1947. A previous journey in 1937 from the East Coast to Illinois and Louisiana and from California to South Carolina, including some longer stays in Chicago, San Francisco, Cambridge, Mass., and New York, had provided the general background as well as the stimulus for further research into the fascinating complexity of modern American civilization. The two journeys to the United States were largely made possible through the generosity of four institutions to which I feel deeply indebted, namely to the *Jubiläumsspende* and the *Privatdozentenstiftung* of the University of Zürich in 1937, and the *Stiftung für wissenschaftliche Forschung* of the University of Zürich and the Swiss-American Society for Cultural Relations in Zürich, in 1947.

I would take this opportunity to express my sincerest thanks to my American friends with whom I had the privilege to discuss different aspects of the material in question, particularly to Fred B. Millett (Wesleyan University, Conn.), Howard Mumford Jones, Harry Levin, Perry Miller and Theodore Spencer (Harvard University), as well as Alfred North Whitehead, Thornton Wilder and the members of the New York P.E.N. Club. I gratefully acknowledge the services of the staff of the Widener Library of Harvard University, of the library of the American Legation in Berne, of the *Schweizerische Landesbibliothek* in Berne, of the *Zentralbibliothek* and the newly founded American Reading Room in Zürich. I am further indebted to James Winny (Jesus College, Cambridge) for revising portions of the MS, and to a number of my students who helped me in matters of bibliography, especially to Alfred Dutli, Richard Gerber, Eduard Kolb, Suzanne Heintz-Friedrich, and Ernst Leisi. I should also like to express my sincere appreciation to Elisabeth Tschopp, Ruth Bendix, Roland Carter and Derek Stubbs who kindly assisted me in reading the proofs.

Above all, however, I would express my deep obligation to Basil Willey (Pembroke College, Cambridge), who very kindly undertook to revise the whole MS, and whose generous assistance and encouragement furthered the progress of the book in general.

The fact that a good many of the books discussed in the present study were published both in the United States and in the United Kingdom accounts for occasional minor inconsistencies in matters of bibliographical reference. The quotations had to be checked according to the rather scanty material available in Switzerland. As a rule the name of a publishing firm is only given in case of quotations. I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to the following publishing firms, agents and authors, holders of copyrights:

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William Saroyan and his agents, Pearn, Pollinger & Higham Limited—for passages from *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*.

Charles Scribner's Sons—for passages from *Selected Poems* by Conrad Aiken, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* by Reinhold Niebuhr, *Philosophy of the Recent Past* by Ralph B. Perry, *The Sense of Beauty* by George Santayana, and *The Story of a Novel* by Thomas Wolfe.

The Vanguard Press—for a passage from *Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell.

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Zürich, March 1951

H. S.

## INTRODUCTION

THE aim of this book is to give an outline of Twentieth-Century American Thought and Letters. It is not meant to be a history of modern literature in the usual sense of the word, and does not aim at anything like completeness. Critical evaluation from an aesthetic point of view is not its primary aim, although the mere selection of the writers is an indication of what is considered essential for the present purpose. The book contains practically no biographical matter, nor will problems of form as a rule be discussed, unless their bearing on the main issues is evident.

The book is intended to be a study in attitudes. It attempts to describe the basic conceptions of life underlying the works of some of the outstanding writers of the century, and the values they believe in. Above all, it tries to establish the links between what novelists, dramatists, and poets, have expressed, and the views of some essayists and especially of the leading philosophers who, in fact, provide the natural framework of the whole. It starts from the assumption that, however different the various trends of thought and means of expression, an age has a definite character. It undertakes to analyse its main aspects with a view to arrive at an understanding of the apparent contradictions and puzzling complexities of the modern American outlook.

It is inevitable that to the initiated the grouping of the authors will often appear exceedingly unorthodox. One does not, as a rule, expect to see Edith Wharton and James T. Farrell discussed in one and the same chapter, nor Santayana and Ezra Pound in another. It is hoped that where that kind of juxtaposition occurs, the reasons for it have been made plain. On the other hand, a study of this sort will necessarily cut across a number of other possible categories. Thus, there are no separate chapters on fiction, criticism, philosophy, etc., nor on periodicals, 'the lost generation', and the like. There is a chapter on poetry, but poetry is only discussed as a more subtle and imaginative reflection of the attitudes found in the present age, and the drama is treated as the expression of a

tremendous conflict that necessarily arises from the existence of fundamentally opposed outlooks.

This study has, moreover, been prompted by the awareness of the dangers implied in the usually lop-sided picture that Europeans are bound to form of American civilization in view of the political and economic supremacy of the United States. Although, however, there is still a very one-sided view of American thought in Europe, it is probably safe to say that partly as a result of the best-sellers, modern American literature has at least become sufficiently known and appreciated in this part of the world to lend itself to a brief systematic analysis of the kind here attempted. Care has therefore been taken that the more important books discussed here, are referred to in a way that should enable the reader to form a rough and ready impression of their contents and character. If the study should, incidentally, introduce the reader to material hitherto not known to him, all the better.

The bulk of the manuscript was completed when the three volumes of the *Literary History of the United States*<sup>1</sup> appeared. This monumental piece of work is indispensable to anyone who wishes to gain more detailed information about almost any point connected with the field at all. Equally indispensable, both as a general survey and for bibliographical reasons, is Fred B. Millett's book *Contemporary American Authors—A Critical Survey and 219 Bio-Bibliographies*, New York, 1940. In view of these two works, bibliographical reference in the present study has been limited to a minimum.

Finally, this is the book of a European observer. As such, it has its bias in thought and method. Whatever exception may be taken to the selective principle underlying it, the book should at least testify to the tremendous vitality of the modern American mind and its impact on those who endeavour to grasp its significance.

<sup>1</sup>*Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, and others. 3 vols. (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1948.

Another important and well-known book of reference is *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, by James D. Hart (Oxford University Press), 1947.

## CHAPTER I

# THE POWER OF REALITY

### *The Pragmatic Conception*

To the foreign observer of the growth of American thought it will always remain an enigma that the one aspect of American conduct generally accepted as outstanding found its philosophical interpretation at such a late date. The pragmatic view of life more commonly and also more honestly adopted in the United States than anywhere else in the Western world had its firm grip on the majority of Americans long before anyone attempted to describe it in terms of abstract thought. Perhaps the very naturalness of that outlook prevented its theoretical discussion, but once this was started it did not stop and has led to a number of most decisive trends in modern thought.

When WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910) in his famous lectures on *Pragmatism* delivered in Boston in 1906 made the distinction between the tender-minded and the tough-minded, indicating that the two have a low opinion of each other and that whereas the radically tender will take up the more monistic forms of religion,<sup>1</sup> the radically tough will need no religion at all, he was possibly overstating the case, but in many other statements he elucidated a general attitude in a way which will never lose its appeal for anyone groping for a working hypothesis of life in surroundings so fast-changing as those of America. Indeed, a summary of the most significant points of James's philosophy sounds very much like the first part of a creed of that portion of the American population which somehow, though not quite justly, has come to be looked upon abroad as the most typical. The second part is given by John Dewey.

James believes that, as we are living in an ever-changing world of experiences, it is impossible to make statements of absolute truth. What was correct yesterday may be wrong

<sup>1</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, New York, 1907 and later, p. 300.

tomorrow. Our thinking is not made to discover absolute truths, but is instrumental and subordinate to the needs and ends of practical life. The function of philosophy, therefore, is simply to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me at a definite moment if one 'truth' or another is accepted. A pragmatist—so runs a frequently quoted statement of James—"turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards facts, towards action and towards power."<sup>1</sup> "Theories thus become instruments,"<sup>2</sup> and those are the best which work best. Ideas become true just in so far as they help us to establish the intended correlation with experience.

Thus the quarrel between the idealist and the materialist is an idle one as long as the irrespective conceptions do not influence<sup>3</sup> their practical attitudes. The difference becomes important only if such conceptions determine the actions of persons in one way or another, or if it gives them a feeling of comfort or discomfort. Thus, contrary to a popular misconception of pragmatism, James permitted religious views the widest possible scope. "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true."<sup>3</sup> And he adds: "experience shows that it certainly does work". The only, though decisive, reservation that he makes is that "we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run."<sup>4</sup> James himself believed in what he called a pluralistic and melioristic universe, i.e., instead of the idea of the absolute, which he rejects, he adopts the view that "higher powers" (note the plural) "exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own",<sup>5</sup> and man is given the power to improve conditions around him.

If James thus still shows leanings towards the metaphysical,<sup>6</sup> JOHN DEWEY (born 1859), in many ways a kindred spirit, dis-

<sup>1</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, p. 300.

<sup>5</sup>William James: *Pragmatism*, p. 300.

cards any definite conception of things metaphysical. The idea of God, it is true, may be retained, but only if religions reject absolutes and confine themselves to values comprehensible within our experience. Morals are merely the approved conventions of the conduct of social groups. It would, however, be unfair to nail down Dewey on that side of his thought which he himself does not consider essential. His quest for certainty lies elsewhere.

It has justly been pointed out<sup>1</sup> that Dewey, through his practical work as a teacher in the Middle West and social worker, was in more immediate contact with the needs of the man in the street than any other American philosopher, and arrived at a clearer understanding of the American spirit. With the possible exception of certain transcendental yearnings of his fellow-countrymen, his views may be summarized as instrumentalism and *operationalism*. There are, however, values in Dewey's thought that take as high a rank as any expressed by a profound idealist. There is, above all, the idea of *democracy*, which according to Dewey "is the belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. . . . Democracy is the faith that the *process* of experience is more important than any special results attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process."<sup>2</sup>

Although this statement was made as late as 1940 it is a keyword to all that Dewey had been striving for in his life. It throws light both on his view of the world as an ever-changing reality, and on the stress which he lays on man's ability to shape his own destiny. How decisive a role Dewey attributes to the relation of the individual with his surroundings becomes apparent in statements such as this: "Experience . . . is that free interaction of individual human beings with surroundings, conditions, especially the human surroundings, which develops and satisfies need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are."<sup>3</sup> Apart from the last three

<sup>1</sup>e.g. by W. K. Wright in his excellent summary of Dewey's work in *A History of Modern Philosophy* (Macmillan), New York, 1941, p. 534.

<sup>2</sup>John Dewey: 'Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us' in *The Philosopher of the Common Man*, New York, 1940, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 227.

words, the meaning of which must be considered highly controversial, this sentence contains the nucleus of Dewey's opinions on social behaviour. It explains his conception of the public as a body of equalitarian character with no privilege for any especial class but with a certain social control of economic conditions that appears as a sort of modified capitalism, and, above all, free education open to all. For it is through education in the widest sense of the word that the desired adjustment of man towards his surroundings can be obtained as an operational basis for his successful activities.

Education is a necessity of life because it is the means of the social continuity of life.<sup>1</sup> So it is not surprising that with Dewey the theory of education becomes almost identical with philosophy in general. One of the most important aspects is the art of reflective thinking, a problem to which Dewey, after numerous preliminary studies, devoted a crowning effort with his book *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). In perfect agreement with his other views concerning the ever-changing reality he considers logic a progressive discipline changing with the various phases of the history of man. The subject matter of logic is determined operationally and logical forms are by no means universal laws of nature but inventions made according to previous operations and liable to be replaced whenever better ones can be invented. Logic is thus fundamentally a social discipline because every inquiry arises from a definite social and cultural background.

Whatever the philosophical objections that may be raised against such statements, the fact remains undisputed that some of the most characteristic features of the modern American outlook can be brought into direct correlation with them, although in many cases it would be impossible to decide whether James and Dewey actually influenced public thought to the degree generally assumed, or whether they should be considered as mouthpieces of the people in the tradition of the pioneers. For it is obvious that the principles of pragmatism are particularly suitable for the needs of pioneering groups who from day to day, have to cope with ever-varying practical difficulties and whose very existence is founded on a melioristic belief

<sup>1</sup>John Dewey: *Democracy and Education* (Macmillan), New York, 1916, p. 3.

Thus the essentially progressive attitude of the modern American manifests itself not only in his satisfaction over technical improvements but also in the fundamental belief that he can make the world a better place if he only knows the given elements and finds the right working method. The mistaken confidence placed in science as a fact-finding activity and in the necessity of methodical work accounts for the meticulous care which is given to, organization and equipment in every field, the humanities included. Not only the best of laboratories but also the best organized libraries and bibliographies of the Western world are to be found in the United States. The great store set by the power of education for practical ends finds its equivalent in the fact that American schools for a long time stressed the purely everyday purpose of knowledge to such a degree that, contrary to the intentions of Dewey, the study of apparently 'useless' subjects such as the Classics was scarcely taken up, whereas the social sciences flourished as in no other country. This attitude has more recently been disputed by American educationalists as a result of other conceptions, the basis of which will be discussed in Chapter III (The Fate of Man).

Of the various developments that originated more or less directly from basically pragmatic conceptions, mention may be made of the so-called 'NEW REALISM', a theory set forth in 1912 by a group of American philosophers with the intention of connecting philosophy more closely with science.<sup>1</sup> Its protagonist was Ralph Barton Perry, born 1876, who later stressed what he termed "the immediate presence both of physical existence in perception and of logical (or mathematical) subsistence in thought".<sup>2</sup>

The Neo-realists considered mind "in terms of the activities of an organism endowed with a nervous system",<sup>3</sup> thus establishing the link with the well-known theory of behaviourism propounded by J. B. Watson in his book *Behaviorism—An*

<sup>1</sup>*New Realism*. Co-operative Studies in Philosophy by Edwin B. Holt, Walter T. Marvin, William P. Montague, Ralph B. Perry, Walter B. Pitkin, Edward G. Spaulding. New York, 1912.

<sup>2</sup>See Ralph B. Perry: *Philosophy of the Recent Past* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, London, 1927, p. 216.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* p. 217.



*Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (1914). This theory, in its turn, is based on the assumption that the behaviour of man should exclusively be seen as a result of stimuli and responses. It is therefore closely related to a deterministic point of view and would, if applied consistently, lead to a fundamentally pessimistic outlook on life. Such consequences have, however, not been drawn by any of the more outstanding philosophers or scientists—another symptom of the basic aversion of American thinkers from a non-melioristic creed.

Another indirect result of the instrumentalist point of view is the intensive occupation of American scholars with the problems of language. The dangers of the 'error of verbal suggestion' as referred to by the Neo-realists have led to a kind of language consciousness that appears to be more highly and more generally developed in America than elsewhere. On the one hand, it has found expression in such institutions as the Chicago and Columbia schools of Logical Positivism, whose efforts are based on the assumption that a good many problems of modern philosophy are merely the outcome of verbal trappings; and on the other, it is connected with the extraordinary awareness of the American public for the role of propaganda in the political, social and economic life of the nation, from the usual advertising campaigns to the great issues of a Presidential election.

To the foreign observer the most striking result of the pragmatic outlook of life appears in the American attitude towards success and failure. Visible and immediate success in the field of any activity is the supreme test of the correctness of a conception. Conversely failure is a sign of its being wrong. This attitude incidentally coincides with the Puritan doctrine that success may be interpreted as a sign of the grace of God, and thus has a twofold basis in the American tradition.

Now it is not surprising that the average individual will easily invert the causal nexus of the principle and arrive at the conclusion that '*what is successful must be good*' and '*what fails must be bad*'. The impact of this view on public morals is enormous and has led to a curious confusion of certain values. The often frankly professed admiration for a successful criminal, the amusement with which an especially clever piece

of graft is received by the public, and the obvious difficulties in fighting against corruption, may be taken as less attractive instances of this phenomenon. On the other hand a new law that proves a failure, such as the law of prohibition, is simply ignored if not intentionally violated, in order to prove its uselessness. The country is big enough to stand that sort of thing. In no other democratic and capitalistic State have political and economic experiments on the largest possible scale been attempted, carried through or abandoned as speedily as in America, just as all the more recent schemes for securing world peace—no matter what their eventual fate—have originated, or at least have been worked out, in the United States.

### *The Social Scene and the Individual*

In contrast to the masterpieces of American Literature in the middle of the nineteenth century, which were chiefly concerned with the ultimate and universal destiny of man, a considerable part of modern American fiction, poetry, and drama, treats of the effect of the social setting upon the conduct of the individual. This change of theme is, of course, not accidental. On the contrary, it belongs to the logic of the new outlook formulated by the pragmatists according to which man's job is to use his intellectual power not for metaphysical speculation, but to adjust himself successfully to his surroundings. In order to achieve the best possible adjustment, one must be clear about one's experiences and learn from them.

When these principles appear in the field of literature the result is what has rather vaguely been called 'realistic writing'. 'Realism' in this sense must then be distinguished from 'Naturalism'. The former is based on the assumption that within certain limits man has his own free will to arrange for his own adjustment, whilst the latter, being connected with a determinist outlook and denying free will, assumes that reality is stronger than man. This difference of outlook accounts for the difference of mood that prevails in writings of the 'realistic' and the 'naturalistic' writers. The 'realistic' writers, satirical, radical, or even fanatic as they may be, never lose sight of an ultimate hope of improving the world and so are never without a tinge of optimism or 'meliorism' to use a term of William

James, whereas the 'naturalistic' writers on the whole create an impression of pessimism, frustration, or even despair.<sup>1</sup> This is the difference between an Upton Sinclair and a James T. Farrell, or between a 'Muckraker' and a 'Proletarian writer', in spite of all the similarity of subject material and themes to be found in both.

It is first turn to the 'realists' with the melioristic outlook, it soon becomes evident that pure-blooded pragmatists are not easily found amongst the really outstanding writers, with the significant exception of the authors of certain best-sellers. In other words, powerful and universal as the appeal to the god of success may be, it has not found many advocates amongst the more distinguished writers. There are, of course, innumerable novels and plays whose leading motive is the pursuit of happiness in the shape of a successful career and a love match, where suspense is provided by the obstacles which the hero or the heroine have to overcome, obstacles of antiquated notions, of family prejudice, of material set-backs and so forth. Good instances of this are to be found in some of the novels of Louis Bromfield, who generally stresses the idea that happiness is not necessarily identical with the bank balance but with the most natural kind of outlet of one's energies. When this theme is connected with a particularly original character and a period background, as in *Mrs. Parkington* (1943), the response of the reading public seems to be assured. Occasionally the settings of such novels may have their unusual aspects so that the ideas accompanying the struggle for adjustment appear more original than a mere repetition of the success and failure theme. This is the case with Pearl S. Buck's novels on life in China, or on the religious level with *The Cardinal* (1950) by Henry Morton Robinson.

It is doubtful, however, whether novels of this type, likable as they are, will survive the age in which they were produced. In all their pleasantness and even neatness of construction, they lack the essence of the deeper struggle for fundamental values and conceptions of life which would keep the interest of later generations awake, or, if they do appear to contain such elements as, for instance, in Bromfield's novel *The Green Bay*

<sup>1</sup> Compare however the introductory remarks to the chapter 'The Aftermath of Determinism', pp. 40-3.

*Tree* (1924), they may not be set forth convincingly enough. And yet for the time being their influence may be considerable. European readers with no first-hand knowledge of America are particularly apt to shape their ideas of modern American life on such conceptions; or else on Hollywood productions, which are, of course, even more misleading.<sup>1</sup>

There is, fortunately, another side to the expression of the pragmatic outlook in modern literature, a grimmer one perhaps, but one at least as equally justified and probably of more lasting effects than the crudely optimistic one. This is the kind of literature that depicts and criticizes certain aspects of modern America with the definite idea that combined efforts might improve the situation both of the individual and of the social background. The pragmatic principle of a close examination of the world of experience in order to stimulate action makes it necessary to stress the unsatisfactory or bad sides of the picture. The results of such an attitude are the writings of the muckrakers, of Upton Sinclair, with certain reservations of Sinclair Lewis and, in part, of Dos Passos, as well as of a number of general critics in more recent times, of whom John Gunther appears to be the best known. They will have to be considered at some length.

THE MUCKRAKING MOVEMENT is one of the most characteristic aspects of early twentieth-century America and, in a broader sense, of the American way of life in general. Such a movement can only have a development in a country in which both a criminally reckless drive for wealth on the one hand, and a strong moral sense combined with a passionate desire for truth and freedom of expression on the other, go hand in hand. The term 'muckraking' is taken from *Pilgrim's Progress* where it is applied to the action of the man who rakes straws, sticks and dust, instead of heeding the celestial crown that is offered to him. In the year 1906 Theodore Roosevelt applied it to the charges of corruption that, in his own opinion, were made too glibly by certain writers and journals. The episode is mentioned

<sup>1</sup>Two interesting books are dealing with this aspect: F. Ansermoz Dubois: *L'interprétation française de la littérature américaine d'entre-deux-guerres*, 1919-1939. Lausanne, 1944.

S. Marjasch: *Der amerikanische Bestseller. Sein Wesen und seine Verbreitung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Schweiz*. Bern, 1946.

by LINCOLN STEFFENS (1866-1936) in his *Autobiography* (1931),<sup>1</sup> one of the most interesting autobiographies in modern literature and an exhaustive account of the muckraking movement. Lincoln Steffens refers to himself as an innocent at that age, and indeed the strange thing about his account is that at least at the beginning of his work he was certainly not aware of the enormous consequences it would have.

He had started like many other newspaper men as a simple reporter in New York, but his superior intelligence and his excellent training in the fields of history, philosophy and psychology at European universities gradually made him aware of the deeper roots of social evil. When he remarks that in his student days in Germany he discovered that there was 'no ethics in philosophy' he gives evidence of that restless search for a moral basis which is a criterion for a puritan turning social reformer. It is difficult to decide which are the most fascinating features of his book—those describing his actual fight by means of publicity against graft, bribery and corruption, or those giving the gradual change in his personal ideas from his early days to his old age, or even those describing the celebrities he met and their reactions towards his work.

The story of how he became aware of the way in which State legislation may provide all the machinery for any kind of dishonest practice, is as revealing as that of the unexpected approval by big crooks of the publicity they received through Steffens's muckraking because it helped to increase their profits. And then follow those unending attempts to clear out or at least to explain 'the muck he raked' in such cities as St. Louis, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, and such states as Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Ohio, etc., etc., until he realizes that it is not so much the question 'who', but 'what' is responsible for the state of things, that matters basically.

Parallel to these activities runs the story of his own inward struggle to get the right attitude towards, and the right conceptions of, all the fundamental problems connected with his discoveries. Now and then he pauses to inquire whether he

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1931, p. 357.

has achieved that degree of honesty in himself that he is fighting for in public life and, like so many others, he discovers that the actual home of Christian love is not always identical with its official one, the churches. He passes through the stage of a radical socialist who believes that only a revolution can really change the situation, and through a stage of profound admiration for the Russian experiment. The last pages of his book, however, make it clear that he does not expect any outward similarity in the development of things in America, though his prophecy (made in 1931) that finance will gradually lose its influence to industrial management, has a curious ring of truth retrospectively. "... it looks as if the fundamental issue may be between management and ownership—not, as in my day, labor and capital, but producers and owners."<sup>1</sup> This anticipates the idea of the 'managerial revolution'<sup>2</sup> and would result in the disappearance of the 'poor rich, the middle class of quiet leisure' as Lincoln Steffens calls them, and the economic system would, in spite of the tremendous difference in political habits and methods between America and Russia, finally be of similar character in the two countries.

Though judgment on the literary significance of the muck-rakers has not yet been passed, it is quite possible that the autobiography of Lincoln Steffens will outlast most of the other literary productions connected with the movement. It has already outlasted the work of David Graham Phillips (1867–1911), who in his day was at least as prominent as Steffens and who, in addition to his work as a reporter, wrote twenty-three novels dealing with various aspects of social oppression and corruption. But there is now something curiously unreal about these 'realistic' pictures of American life, and the reason for it lies partly in the inadequacy of his character drawing, partly in the mechanism of his plots and endings.

Phillips's changing reputation makes one occasionally wonder what the eventual fate of UPTON SINCLAIR's writing will be. Born in the year 1878, he is still widely read but there is now much more scepticism about the permanent value of his books than say in the 1920s. The tremendous scope of his

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 869.

<sup>2</sup>See James Burnham: *The Managerial Revolution*, New York, 1941.

Lanny Budd novels,<sup>1</sup> on which he has been working since 1940, is undisputed and his power of invention and ease of writing seem unshaken, but the curious fact remains that, though his later novels contain much less direct propaganda than his earlier ones and therefore might be nearer a purely literary or artistic achievement, they appear to lack the strong appeal of his younger days. In Europe, at any rate, Upton Sinclair is most frequently spoken of in connection with the radicalism of his social purposes and his adventures, personal and literary, in the muckraking movement, even if that word is not used.

Like Lincoln Steffens's, his life has been largely an attempt to transform his ideas into practical realities; and so it offers the rather rare attraction of a life shaped by personal convictions. It is certain that the hack writing which he had to do before he was twenty in order to earn his living, helped him to achieve the amazing speed and fluency in producing his books. But possibly it also caused his disregard for careful and water-tight plots and for the nicer shades of characterization and psychology. Whatever such defects, it is difficult not to be attracted by the honesty and directness of his conceptions, the courage of his attacks on social abuses and the optimism of his outlook in general.

In this respect he is fundamentally different from the so-called proletarian school of writers, and more obviously American. The mere fact that he arrived at a socialist ideal through the logic of Christianity puts him on a different level. His co-operative experiments in economics, his participation in the Colorado coal strike, his support of President Wilson on the outbreak of the First World War, and his bid for the governorship of California, were all dictated by his earnest desire to increase the sum total of man's happiness. There is indeed a strong touch of the seeker in this vegetarian, total abstainer, and prohibitionist, whose conviction it is that man is not really bad at heart, but has become so as a result of wicked habits, corrupt surroundings, and a rotten economic system.

Nearly all his best-known novels, from *The Jungle* (1906) to

<sup>1</sup>So far there have been eight novels with Lanny Budd as the hero, i.e. *World's End*, 1940; *Between Two Worlds*, 1941; *Dragon's Teeth*, 1942; *Wide Open Gate*, 1943; *Presidential Agent*, 1944; *Dragon Harvest*, 1945; *A World to Win*, 1946; *Presidential Mission*, 1947.

*The Flivver King* (1937), are no more than a systematic survey of all those aspects of American life that can be comprehended in the terms of a social reformer unconscious of the defects of his qualities. As long as one agrees with the basic assumption that the first condition of human happiness is a certain amount of physical comfort and economic justice, one has no difficulty in following Sinclair's lead. Indeed, his power of persuasion is always strongest when it is most definitely connected with a clearly defined subject. His first great novel *The Jungle* (1906) is a very good instance of this kind, and it must be emphasized that it took no small amount of courage to protest publicly against the incredible working conditions which at that time were prevalent in the Chicago meat-packing system.

Sinclair worked with three principles to attain the end he was striving for. He stirred up the sympathy of the readers with the poorest and weakest of the working classes, that is, the new immigrants from eastern Europe, by depicting their sufferings at the hands of brutal and cunning superiors, their helplessness in the police courts and their moral breakdown as a result of such inhuman treatment. Next he adhered to direct observation as closely as possible, avoiding exaggerations that could not be supported by evidence, and finally, as a new device, he created a feeling of physical disgust with the existing conditions in the production of foodstuffs. This last device was perhaps the most successful one because it influenced not only that section of the public which already has a strong social conscience anyway and so does not need converting but also those who, as a rule, are indifferent towards social abuses unless their own well-being is affected, and that was obviously so when bad food was being distributed.

It is not surprising that, on the initiative of Theodore Roosevelt, steps were taken at once, with the result that the meat-packing system was vastly improved. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 was introduced, and Upton Sinclair was invited to become head of a packing company himself.<sup>1</sup> This is applied melioristic pragmatism at its best, and in view of the good effect of the book, its weaknesses—such as the change of the hero from an honest worker into a tramp, a thief, a scab,

<sup>1</sup>See F. B. Millet: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, p. 580.



and finally into an ardent socialist without sufficient psychological plausibility—do not weigh too heavily. •

In fact, one becomes curiously reconciled to these weaknesses in many other Sinclair novels, especially if the unity of purpose is fairly well kept, and one allows oneself to be driven along by the author's brilliant, passionate and satirical attacks on some particularly obvious or cunningly hidden social evil of our age. It does not even make much difference if the attacks appear in the forms of novels or of mere tracts. Thus in *King Coal* (1917) he attacks the Colorado coal mining companies and their hold over the whole social system of the state, in *The Brass Check* (1920) the morals of the press, in *Oil!* (1927) the corrupt influence of oil magnates on the Harding administration, in *Boston* (1928) the 'patriotic' prejudice of the higher classes of Boston in the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, in the *Mountain City* (1928) certain methods of 'getting rich quick', in *Upton Sinclair presents William Fox* (1933) the film industry, in *The Flivver King* (1937) the problems of labour and management in the motor-car industry, and so on.

There are more than a hundred separate titles in Sinclair's work, and his share in having made the American public conscious of the true state of affairs in certain sections of its civilization is enormous. Even if the bulk of his writings may, as literature, not stand the test of time, his position as a national monitor will remain undisputed.

The description and interpretation of the social scene from a melioristic point of view has, however, not remained the monopoly of the novelists and muckrakers. In fact, the success of a number of publications, especially from the 1930s onwards, seems to point towards the arrival of a new *genre* of widely read writings: THE SOCIOLOGICAL ESSAY. Formerly of interest only to a comparatively small group of scholars, historians, and social workers, and chiefly used as source material for journalists and less frequently for novelists and dramatists, the sociological essay has now established itself as an accepted medium of general information. Sometimes one has the impression that the American public, growing a little impatient with the necessarily one-sided pictures drawn by social critics with an axe to grind, are on the alert for a more unbiased and reliable description of

their own background. This tendency was, of course, considerably strengthened by the peculiar quality of what has been called literary journalism, i.e., by columnists of international reputation whose serialized articles on the political and social aspects of the United States helped to make the common reader America-conscious. Indeed, without the articles of such writers as William Allen White, Dorothy Thompson, Stuart Chase, and Walter Lippmann, it is difficult to imagine the formation of American public opinion. It would go beyond the limits set to this study to consider this field of writing, but its general influence can easily be underrated.

Now and then, however, attempts have been made to analyse and interpret the whole of certain aspects of modern America in detail. One of the first in the field was the volume *Civilization in the United States* (1922) by thirty different authors under the editorship of Harold E. Stearns (born 1890). It created a considerable stir because its ruthless exposure of several of not very pleasant facts shook the natural complacency of an age dominated by a bid for prosperity.

A similar attempt, but made singlehanded, was Preston William Slosson's book *The Great Crusade and After, 1914-1928* (1930), which, in such chapters as 'America at School', 'The Experiment in Prohibition', 'The American Woman Wins Equality', 'The South in Black and White', etc., gave facts and figures that since then have become almost general knowledge. Both Stearns and Slosson, however, were still openly dissatisfied with the existing state of things and were thus not unlike the muckrakers at the beginning of the century.

A new conception and method in analysing the American way of life was brought to general notice by Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd in their two books *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937). Together they make a fascinating study of the social and economic structure, the habits and codes of behaviour, the interests and pastimes of the entire population of a small American town, both in the periods of prosperity and depression. The mere fact that books of this kind containing soberly analysed material have had such wide appeal, confirms the statement that the will to understand his own character is a prominent feature of the contemporary American reader.

The most recent and most outstanding example of this sort of introspective analysis is John Gunther's volume *Inside U.S.A.* (1947). This is an amazing achievement in many respects and may well remain the standard work of its kind for many years to come. Tightly packed with facts and figures, documented to almost the last word of even reported speech, impartial in praise and criticism, it runs to nearly a thousand pages and seldom tires the reader. It is the perfect instance of what responsible journalism can do when it combines with a resolute belief in factual description a keen sense of interpretation and the racy and colourful style typical of the best journals.

From the foreword, in which ten of the most incredible contrasts in American public life are summarized, to the 'Finale', where fourteen characteristics of the country are listed as the result of the whole investigation, there is hardly a dull line. Whether the author generalizes about the Middle West that "sounds the most spontaneous natural note in the nation" and "represents the full flowering of the gadget mind"<sup>1</sup> or comments on the segregation between black and white in the south,<sup>2</sup> whether he draws a picture of a man such as La Guardia in a detailed description of his daily work, minute by minute,<sup>3</sup> or explains the position of the Boston Brahmin,<sup>4</sup> whether he mentions that a mail order company in Chicago sends out seven million catalogues annually,<sup>5</sup> or that ninety-seven per cent of all the farms in Kentucky have no toilets inside the house<sup>6</sup>—whether he goes into the problem of absentee ownership in the south<sup>7</sup> or the decrease of population in the State of Montana,<sup>8</sup> whether he shocks the reader by the statement that in a North Carolina town of one hundred thousand inhabitants there were forty-seven murder cases in the year 1940,<sup>9</sup> or delights him with the story of Tennessee Valley<sup>10</sup>—everything is in its right and proper place.

The magnificent balance of humorous anecdote, telling characterization and epic recital makes the most incredible statements plausible. He convinces us that the United States produces more steel than Great Britain, France, Russia,

<sup>1</sup>John Gunther: *Inside U.S.A.* (Harper & Brothers), New York and London, 1947, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 679, ff.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 578, ff.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 461.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 272.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 640.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p. 673.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 155.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p. 671.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.* p. 731, ff.

Germany and Japan together.<sup>1</sup> We understand the charm of the south in spite of all its glaring defects, we do not question that in 1945 the Americans spent over a billion dollars on jewellery and yet that forty per cent of all the homes have neither bathtub nor shower,<sup>2</sup> and we even accept the prophecies that "the next New Deal will make the last New Deal look mild",<sup>3</sup> or that if "the free enterprise system [should] collapse, as a result of mismanagement or inflation, . . . the mood of this nation could dangerously change".<sup>4</sup> All this reveals the author's fundamentally melioristic conception. He obviously loves America and is convinced that "it is a lucky country with an almost obsessive belief in the happy ending". Only a pragmatist can be so frank about the imperfections of an object so dear to his heart and thus make the reader draw all the necessary conclusions for his best possible adjustment to this fascinating piece of reality.

When in 1930 SINCLAIR LEWIS (1885-1951) got the Nobel Prize he declared in his address before the Swedish Academy that he had realized "in reading Balzac and Dickens that it was possible to describe French and English common people as one actually saw them. But", he went on, "it had never occurred to me that one might without indecency write of the people of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, as one felt about them".<sup>5</sup> This statement explains a good deal of the heated discussion in the '20s and again in 1947 (with the publication of *Kingsblood Royal*) over Lewis's picture of America. Lewis wrote what he actually felt about his people, whereas the reading public generally, though perhaps unconsciously, mistook his writings for objective documents of the state of affairs in America. It is therefore not surprising that those Americans who had similar reactions towards the problems dealt with by Lewis were delighted that here at last was a man who dared to speak the truth, whereas those whose feelings were different got annoyed at the provocative way in which facts appeared to be distorted. V. L. Parrington who called Lewis "our own Diogenes",

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 615.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 919.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. xi.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 920.

<sup>5</sup>*Why Sinclair Lewis Got the Nobel Prize.* Addresses by Erik Axel Karlfeldt and by Sinclair Lewis (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1930, p. 22.

summed up the situation nicely and ironically by saying that "despite the fact that in many ways he is a good fellow, we blackball Sinclair Lewis".<sup>1</sup>

The question whether Lewis gives the right or wrong picture of American life is of course beside the point, except for the non-American reader with no first-hand knowledge of the country, who, for a period of roughly ten years, was likely to consider Lewis's novels as documentary evidence of the subject in question. This may have had its influence on the formation of that curiously lop-sided picture of America that even in our own days may be found amongst Europeans, namely that the Americans on the whole are a healthy and robust, money-mad and narrow-minded people with no sense of privacy, no individual life and personal values, and who permanently speak in superlatives about their own achievements.

And yet it would be wrong to assume that the recognition which Lewis's work brought him abroad was due to that error in interpretation. On the contrary, the positive judgment of Lewis's work rests, I believe, largely on the perception that his feelings about things shared by so many all over the world, had never before been so adequately expressed. After all, every person with the rudiments of independent thinking gets occasionally exasperated by the pettiness of the people in the main street of his own town, or by the prejudices of his business friends and the impossibility of getting away from it. To find an author who could be satirical and perhaps even bitter yet always entertaining and never gloomy about it, was a tremendous relief.

Three of Lewis's best known and probably best-written novels, *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Dodsworth* (1929), have a common theme though it does not show up in equal strength in the three books. It is the struggle of one person to overcome the tribal opinions of his surroundings, to get away from the routine of conventional activities, and to do something different. In *Main Street* this theme is set against the background of American small-town life, especially that of its upper class to which belong "all persons engaged in a profession, or

<sup>1</sup>V. L. Parrington: *Our Own Diogenes*, University of Washington Press, No. 5, 1927, p. 27. Also in *Main Currents in American Thought* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1927. Vol. 3, p. 369.

earning more than twenty-five hundred dollars a year, or possessed of grandparents born in America".<sup>1</sup>

If you substitute the word America for the word 'there' the picture would easily suit thousands of small towns in a large part of the Western world, for events such as the dismissal of a woman teacher because she is suspected of corrupting her oldest pupils, the suspicion with which a young man of artistic talent and temperament is looked upon, or the admiration shown for a native returning from the outside world with plenty of money and some idiotic opinions, might happen anywhere. On the other hand, some especially strong features such as the description of the Women's Club where in discussion groups they do Men and Women of the Bible, Furnishing and China, and European Literature all in one year, may belong to the field of successful caricature and to what Lewis 'actually felt' about it rather than to anything else. Carol Kennicott, the heroine, fights bravely and with just a touch of snobbishness against all that stuffiness, fails, submits, breaks away for a time, but eventually resigns herself to it because she cannot arrange her life entirely for herself.

In *Babbitt* the background becomes somewhat larger in correspondence with the larger setting of Zenith in which the real estate property dealer Mr. George Folsom Babbitt, runs his business. But it is fundamentally the same conventional conceptions, with the addition of a belief in the Republican Party and the boom, that govern the life of the central figure, though he too occasionally would like to take a holiday from the routine of his business and family life. But apart from a little irregularity in a flirtation with a widow and an honest attempt to defend some radical opinions, quickly given up after he is cold-shouldered by his friends, the victory of the herd instinct over the hero is practically complete. And yet we cannot really quarrel with him—he is far too likable in his normality and altogether quite honest with himself in his little problems.

*Dodsworth* is a more ambitious attempt, because on top of a subtle analysis of a wealthy American businessman's search for his own individuality, there is the problem of his marriage with a lovely, capricious and maddeningly selfish woman,

<sup>1</sup>*Main Street* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1920, p. 74. •

and the question of what Europe means and does to both of them. Above all, it makes Sam Dodsworth aware of what he does not like about America, such as the restless and often entirely unnecessary activities of his fellow-countrymen and the veneration of the God of Speed. On the other hand he occasionally explodes with wrath at the ridiculous misconceptions he finds amongst educated Europeans, that Americans are all money-lenders trying to cheat Europe, or tobacco-chewing farmers who would like to spit on the Cathedral of St. Mark, or gunmen murdering Chicagoans in their beds.<sup>1</sup> And yet Europe helps Sam to realize that after all a man may enjoy his life in his own quiet way, in spite of the fact that his best friend tells him: "You're typically American in being burdened with a sense of guilt, no matter what you do or you don't do."<sup>2</sup>

Lewis touches here upon a point that, as a rule, lies entirely outside his usual sphere of interest and yet connects him—though very slightly—with that other group of writers who are more worried about the destiny of man than about the surroundings in which he lives. Lewis has sometimes been accused of criticizing the American scene without making an attempt to show how things could be changed. Apart from the fact that this is not the novelist's business, the charge is certainly not justified because, if Lewis's belief in thinking and acting as independently of the herd instinct as possible were shared and followed by more people, the scene would change considerably.

This belief underlies most of his novels, different as they may be in their subject matter. It may suffice to mention *Martin Arrowsmith* (1925), which is the story of the development of a bacteriologist and his difficulties in following the principles of scientific and personal truth, in the face of the commercialized interests of the chemical industry and the distortions of publicity. It is the lonely hunter who finds most satisfaction in his serious quest. In *Gideon Planish* (1943) the author satirizes some aspects of the educational system of his country, particularly its business implications, which boil down to the fact that here, too, slogans sell better than truths.

<sup>1</sup>*Dodsworth* (Grosset & Dunlap), New York, 1929, p. 225.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 362.

*It Can't Happen Here* (1935) deals with an attempt by a group of unscrupulous politicians to obtain power and a fascist dictatorship by an appeal to snob psychology and mass hysteria arising out of deep-rooted prejudices. It exposes the danger of following slogans blindly instead of thinking independently. The note of optimism that enters towards the end of the story, is a sign, however, that after all Lewis considers the American instinct for liberty to be just a little stronger than all the other shortcomings together.

In *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) it is the colour prejudice that plays havoc with a man who, after having been generally accepted as white, likable and useful in the higher circles of a small community in the Middle West, discovers and reveals that he has a little negro blood in his veins. He automatically loses most of his white friends and his job, and eventually is driven from his own house by an infuriated mob. It is a perfectly logical link in a chain of ideas that centres upon the problem of deep-rooted prejudice of whatever kind, as a paralysing element in man's fight for independence and truth.

Lewis has sometimes been criticized on the ground that neither plot nor characterization are of a very subtle kind in his novels. It is probably true that these two elements carry less weight than the powerful individual scenes or even the terse remarks of which there are plenty, even if their irony is sometimes a little bit forced. Lewis so obviously takes sides with the characters and events in his own novels that one is never uncertain about the values he believes in. If this may occasionally diminish the purely aesthetic enjoyment of his books, it also makes for a clearer message.<sup>1</sup> And it is this message of the fighter against prejudices and narrow-mindedness that will secure Lewis's place in the history of social criticism set forth in the shape of fiction.

"... Mr. Dos Passos does, really does, what all of us have frequently proved could not be done: he has given the panorama, the sense, the smell, the sound, the soul, of New York." This enthusiastic statement was made by Sinclair Lewis as early as

<sup>1</sup>See also Alfred Kazin: *On Native Grounds* (Reynal & Hitchcock), New York, 1942, p. 217-226; and Pierre Brudin: *Les écrivains américains de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Horizons de France), Paris, 1946, p. 46-72.



1926,<sup>1</sup> four years after the first books of JOHN DOS PASSOS (born 1896) appeared. In the subsequent years this judgment has probably been more frequently endorsed by critics than any other evaluation of a contemporary novelist. It was, for instance, backed as late as 1947 by Joseph Warren Beach who said: " . . . altogether Dos Passos has given us the most comprehensive and convincing picture of American life in certain highly characteristic phases that is anywhere to be found".<sup>2</sup>

This is high praise, indeed, and comes from headquarters. And in view of the various phases of thought and styles which Dos Passos underwent in the twenty years in question it is doubly remarkable that the estimate of his work has remained unchanged. There was a time when Dos Passos was looked upon as a member of the proletarian school of writing which flourished in the depression period of the early '30s. This was, to say the least, a very inexact—though understandable—appraisal of the work of an author whose sympathy has always been quite definitely with 'the underdog'.<sup>3</sup> In fact this sympathy is perhaps the one central aspect of his work that cuts right across from his early travel books to his trilogy *U.S.A.*, and further to the reporting on the pitiable state of Europe after the Second World War. However, the ideas that emerged from this basic sympathy assume vastly different shapes, and if one follows the more abstract kind of statements made by Dos Passos one can understand his wish to comprehend as large a sphere of human existence as possible.

In his earliest book of impressions of Spain *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) he speaks with admiration of the "intense individualism" and "the strong anarchistic reliance on the individual man"<sup>4</sup> to be found in the Spanish Communes and of "the conviction that only the individual soul is real".<sup>5</sup> This does not predict anything like a conventional belief in collectivity but it is a fair instance of the intense interest which right

<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Lewis: *John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer* (Harper & Brothers), New York, 1926, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Beach: 'Dos Passos 1947' in *Sewanee Review*, Summer 1947, p. 414.

<sup>3</sup>F. B. Millet: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup>Dos Passos: *Rosinante to the Road Again* (Brandt & Brandt), New York, 1922, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 61.

from his beginnings Dos Passos took in the state of man in certain environments. It forms a direct link with statements he made in connection with the Second World War. In his interesting study of Roger Williams and the spiritual background of the American Revolution entitled *The Ground We Stand On* (1941) he says: "... what we aim to do is to work towards increasing the happiness and dignity of every man, just because he is a man".<sup>1</sup> This clause 'just because he is a man' is of course the distinct feature, for if we try to pin down Dos Passos on an equally important statement made in the same book, it appears almost incompatible with the idea of man shaping his own happiness: "... men don't make up much of their own behavior: they behave within limits laid down by their upbringing and group background".<sup>2</sup>

Here is the problem in a nutshell and one might say that Dos Passos's novels are very largely illustrations of it on a tremendous canvas. He seems eternally worried and egged on by the question just how far and in what way each of the numberless individuals that appear in his books is capable of shaping his own destiny and just how much the conditioning does to him. And with alternations of stress laid either on the power of the background or on the fact that "the people is everybody and one man alone"<sup>3</sup> Dos Passos appears either as a social critic with determinist leanings or as a convinced individualist with humanitarian interests.

It is true that in his early novels, for example *Streets of the Nights* (1923), we should not discover the elements mentioned so easily if we did not know what follows later. For the emphasis is so much more on the principle of 'one man alone' that we are apt to forget the background which plays its part in the lives of the three young people in the story: Fanshaw, who does Red Cross work in Italy in the First World War and vaguely—if not weakly—hopes for an intellectual life of his own; and Nancibel, who only thinks of her career in music, and who by her coldness towards Wennie, who loves her and cannot understand life, drives him to commit suicide. And even in his much better known war novel *Three Soldiers* (1921) the author's

<sup>1</sup>Dos Passos: *The Ground We Stand On* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1941, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Dos Passos: *Number One* (Houghton Mifflin Co.), Boston, 1943, p. 303.

interest, despite the rather terrible criticism implied in the depressing background of the military organization of the American Expeditionary Force and the events in Europe, is chiefly centred in the impression of this outside world on the sensitive mind of a musician.

It is in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) that the characteristic qualities of Dos Passos appear for the first time in their full colours. It is like a powerful prelude to the three great movements of the trilogy *U.S.A.*, anticipating a few themes and techniques that afterwards make for the full orchestration of the bigger work. Here, for the first time, we get that impression of multitudes of people struggling on in their respective social surroundings, infinite varieties of the species of man, characterized and individually distinguished by a few gestures, a couple of sentences, a muttered expression, some frantic movement. Sometimes, as with Ellen and Jimmy Herf, events and characterization may be given in rather finer brushwork, but it would be impossible to say that we follow their story with greater interest than the minutest incident like that of an old woman immigrant standing helplessly at the ferry landing. And, above all, there are to each chapter those strange little introductions that sometimes read like poetic images of what follows in the story, and present the changing picture of the vitality and cruelty of New York life.

All this reappears in even greater proportions in *U.S.A.*, the trilogy comprising *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936). It is and will always remain difficult for a European reader to appreciate this achievement in all its aspects. There are so many points which, for a full understanding of all their implications, require an almost lifelong acquaintance with America that the non-American critic will always have to struggle with a feeling of uncertainty about them. This, by the way, is undoubtedly the reason why the author has perhaps not received his due share of recognition outside America. And yet in composition *U.S.A.* is more compact than *Manhattan Transfer*.

Among the hundreds of characters appearing in it there are roughly a dozen whose life stories are followed systematically through the years before the First World War, the war itself, and the post-war period. They are, as before, from all spheres

of life and cover every activity imaginable, running away from home, pushing and being pushed around, cheating and being cheated, trying to earn their living in all sorts of ways, grabbing a career or spoiling it, making love secretly or openly, violently or casually, and getting into trouble, and whatever the action, it is invariably made plausible.

In the immense range of experience that Dos Passos seems to have at command, most of his characters, unlikely as it may seem at first, eventually meet, thus creating a strange web of unity in diversity. Sometimes James Ward Moorehouse ('J. W.') has been taken for the pivot of the trilogy, and though a great many things happen without any direct relation to him it is quite as true that most events are connected in some way with his existence.

'J. W.', from a boy of a very modest environment in Delaware, rises—through his agreeable manners, his engaging boyish 'blue-eyed' look, his art of meeting the right people, using the right slogan at the right moment, and a marriage with a millionaire's daughter—to the position of a man controlling almost unlimited publicity in favour of American private capital. 'J. W.' thus becomes what Dos Passos seems to consider one of the greatest dangers in modern society: a man who, though he may believe in his work, sells ideas that are made to look like ideals, at the ultimate expense of the underdog, and develops a sense of self-importance thereby. The underdog, on the other hand, appears in three variations: Mac, who in all his adventurous life hardly ever rises above the worst poverty, Charley Anderson, who, from the poorest beginnings and a life in the A.E.F., succeeds in making a fortune in the post-war period, only to end up as a wastrel killed in a motor accident, and Jo Williams, a sailor, who meets his fate in a tavern brawl on Armistice Day. And in between are all those others: Dick Savage, the doomed and fated intellectual, Ben Compton, the revolutionary agitator, and, above all, the women, curiously vivid in their portraits but almost all of them strangely abnormal, partly frigid in their professional capabilities as secretaries (Janey) and decorators (Eleanor), or of an insatiable curiosity for men (Evelyn), or just frankly mercenary (Margo Dowling). In addition to all these are hundreds of minor characters—manual labourers and financiers, soldiers and

sailors, tramps and preachers, dupes and swindlers, pimps and prostitutes—and there is hardly ever a line that strains credulity.

One serious criticism has been offered against this incredibly rich power of invention: there is no middleground to the picture.<sup>1</sup> The extremes are so intensely worked out that there is no space left for the uneventful lives of those millions of ordinary middle-class representatives who travel neither by freight train nor by pullman, do not get into mischief every other day, nor drink themselves to death. This is no criticism against the work as such, but solely against the conception that *U.S.A.* is really representative of U.S.A.

The latter idea has of course been strengthened by the way in which the introductions of *Manhattan Transfer* have been changed into the much more differentiated background preludes of the 'Newsreel', the 'Camera Eye', and the biographies in *U.S.A.* Dos Passos deliberately chooses this medium to make the reader aware of the gigantic drift of events in the world at large, which accompanies the main themes of the story without his having to refer to them in the actual progress of each character. This technique is a reminder of Joyce's *Ulysses* without which precedent the preludes could hardly have been written; but whereas the Irishman permitted the stream of consciousness to mix in all its richness with the doings of his characters, the American methodically separates the two spheres and thus makes for more strongly pronounced rhythms in the epic.

Often the bearing on the situation in the story is immediately evident, now and then strangely obscured and sometimes, at least to the non-American reader, almost entirely non-existent, except in a most general way. The 'Newsreel' in the form of headlines, newspaper reports and popular songs comes like a shock reminding the reader of the fears and hopes, the enthusiasm and the fury of the public about events now often nearly forgotten, the 'Camera Eye' gives the loosely connected and partly subconscious reactions of the sensitive mind of a young man living amidst the events of the period, and the biographies are laconic chronicles of the outstanding men and women of the age, whether crooks or heroes, from Eugene Debs to Samuel

<sup>1</sup>See the chapter on Dos Passos in Maxwell Geismar: *Writers in Crisis* (Houghton Mifflin Co.), Boston, 1942, pp. 89-139.

Insull, from William Haywood to Woodrow Wilson, from Steinmetz to Isadora Duncan. They reveal the personal sympathies and scales of values of the author more clearly than any other passages.

Indeed, the values professed by Dos Passos may form the one aspect of the work that is apt to become obsolescent, for the sympathy with the underdog here takes the shape of a simplification that the generation of the Second World War would hardly accept. Money and power do not invariably make crooks and bullies of those who have them, nor is poverty the sole reason for the suffering of the lowly. But the profound bitterness of Dos Passos, though it may not always be directed into the most plausible channels, comes from such a fundamental feeling for justice that one will hardly quarrel with him on that account.

It is really this feeling of justice which makes Dos Passos lash out at some especially neuralgic points in American politics in two novels written after *U.S.A.* The first, *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), is the life story of Glenn Spotswood, who after college becomes profoundly impressed by the ideals of socialism, joins a left-wing party, helps to organize labour unions, especially in some mining districts of Pennsylvania, undergoes all the hardship and injustice of one fighting against 'company pressure', realizes that the 'Party' is more interested in its own success than in the fate of the individual worker, leaves America to join the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, is suspected of being a Trotskyite, gets arrested and is finally killed in a skirmish. About those who actually run the party most ostensibly concerned with the state of the working class, the author's disillusion is complete. The moral here so obviously points towards individual decency of conduct and dignity as decisive compared with dogmatic narrow-mindedness of any sort, that the crooks and bullies appear fairly well distributed from top to bottom.

The bitterness about the fate of the individual who tries to be loyal to a cause only to be let down at the critical moment by those above him, also permeates the second novel, *Number One* (1943). The parallel of the theme is underscored by the fact that Tyler Spotswood, the loyal secretary to a successful politician, is the brother of Glenn in the preceding novel. He •

ends up by going to gaol rather than turn the tables on his former employer, who sacrifices him to save his own skin. Again it is a grim picture that Dos Passos draws of the connections between politicians, financiers and publicity. And apart from the central theme there is a strange similarity in the speech power of Chuck Crawford (Number One) and J. W. Moorehouse of *U.S.A.* They both use language as a demagogical instrument to lure the unwary into following the mountebank and then to exploit and betray him.

Dos Passos can adopt the style of political oratory with uncanny perfection and just a touch of caricature in it. And the struggle of Tyler against his own addiction to drink appears almost as a symbol of that straightening out of the individual that Dos Passos considers necessary before any true help for the people can become effective. Thus, Tyler in his inarticulate way says at the end of the story: "We can't sell out on the people, but the trouble is that me, I'm just as much the people as you are or any other son of a bitch. If we want to straighten the people out we've got to start with number one, not that big wind. . . . You know what I mean. I got to straighten myself out first, see. . . ."<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgment of the importance of moral values would sound surprisingly like a triviality in almost every other novelist, but for a writer who has been through the inferno of the lost its significance is of the first order.

These values reappear even more clearly in *The Grand Design* (1949), which is a novel about the New Deal and its promoters, and in the topical book *The Prospect Before Us* (1950).<sup>2</sup>

### *The Aftermath of Determinism*

Unlike the pragmatic outlook, which has found complete expression in philosophy, fiction, and the drama, the strong current of determinism noticeable in various writers from the end of the nineteenth century right into the 1930s has never been adequately voiced in American philosophy. The idea that

<sup>1</sup>Dos Passos: *Number One* (Houghton Mifflin Co.), Boston, 1943, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup>Other recent estimates of Dos Passos include Claude-Edmonde Magny: *L'âge du roman américain* (Editions du Seuil), Paris, 1948, pp. 117-158; and George Skell: *The Shapers of American Fiction* (E. P. Dutton & Co.), New York, 1947, pp. 249-263.

reality is stronger than man and that human beings are at the mercy of the blind forces of nature, surroundings, and heredity, appears quite frequently in American literature, but has remained without an advocate of any real standing in the school of abstract thought. Its basis is, as in the case of the pragmatic outlook, a sort of radical empiricism going back to the ideas of Spencer.

It is possible that a clearly stated denial of the existence of free will would go so much against the grain of a people devoted to the creation of a new civilization, that it simply could not be made. And yet the American public has been fully aware that such an attitude is possible, if only as a prolonged mood of pessimism about the status of man within reality. The awareness that reality may be hard and cruel grows in proportion to the plausibility with which it is being described. What is usually called the 'naturalistic school' is characterized not so much by the attempt to describe 'things as they are' as by the peculiar predisposition of the writer to select for description those features of life that appear particularly disconcerting. In search of such motives the naturalistic writers have discovered the possibilities of exploiting the squalor and misery of the lower classes, the prejudices of those higher up and the helplessness of the individual in the social machinery,

This discovery of new subject material (made long before in European literature) will probably be of greater importance in the long run than the outlook which is behind it. For, whatever the results of the naturalistic writers might otherwise have been, there is no doubt that the curious appeal that lies in the presentation of the life of the lowly has been widely exploited by writers of otherwise very different attitudes, such as O'Neill. On the other hand, a determinist is not necessarily bound to the description of mainly physical discomforts. Edith Wharton, though definitely deterministic in a number of her best novels, would hardly be called a naturalistic writer. Evidently the two terms naturalism and determinism as used in American criticism cover partly but not entirely the same thing.

There is one curious feature which most American determinists seem to have in common, and which distinguishes them from their European counterparts: they secretly seem to hope that after all there might be some sort of justice in this world



that would give their own pessimism the lie.<sup>1</sup> This is especially obvious in some of the so-called Proletarian writers of the '30s. There is a certain affinity between them and the muckrakers in as far as they both aim at exposing social abuses. Thus they both adhere to some kind of naturalistic method. But whereas the muckrakers—as was shown in the preceding chapter—base their work on the assumption that the change for the better is perfectly possible with some good will of the responsible persons, the proletarians would first need to convert the whole public to Marxian determinism before anything useful could be done. This is so vital a difference of outlook that in spite of the similarity of technique the two groups are further from each other than, say, an Edith Wharton and a Richard Wright. Thus, the writers grouped in the present chapter have primarily been chosen for their predominantly deterministic attitude, whereas the criterion of naturalistic technique comes in only as a frequent but not inevitable feature accompanying the main theme.

In American philosophy determinism has not been conclusively defined, and this may have much to do with the fact that only exceptionally it appears in unadulterated form. Even Frank Norris, who together with Stephen Crane is generally looked upon as its chief advocate at the beginning of the century, in his novel *The Octopus* (1901) cannot refrain from expressing some hope, however distant, of a final victory of good. This is one of the early powerful tales of farmers on the defensive against the machine age and big business.

O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) on the other hand, in a few of his innumerable short stories, of which the best known are collected in *The Four Million* (1906), adopts an attitude similar to that of Thomas Hardy and Maupassant, i.e., the irony of the chances of an indifferent universe may give things a turn sometimes to the good and sometimes to the bad. It is interesting that this attitude has, in a weaker form, been standardized in a good many short stories of the popular magazine type, thus competing with the other generally accepted attitude of pragmatic optimism.

<sup>1</sup>This conception has been set forth in a very interesting and instructive analysis of the naturalistic movement and its limitations given by Malcolm Cowley in his essay 'Not Men. A Natural History of American Naturalism', *Kenyon Review*, Summer 1947, p. 414.

The determinism of Jack London is again of a different kind. The mere fact that he fluctuates in his conceptions between those of Marx and Nietzsche shows what contradictory values he sets store by. He stresses brute instincts as the dominant motive power in man's life, and this, together with his confused ideas of socialism, makes it possible for him to be misrepresented as one of the forerunners of the Fascist outlook. His enormous reading public, both in America and in Europe, bears testimony to more than one hidden desire in Western man.

It seems a big step from Jack London to Theodore Dreiser and J. T. Farrell and from those two to Edith Wharton and J. P. Marquand, and yet if one takes determinism as the basis the connection will soon be made. One can, to paraphrase William James, make a distinction between a tough and a tender-minded kind of determinism, or a hard-boiled and a genteel one.

THEODORE DREISER (1871-1945) is nearer the tough-minded kind of determinist, and yet—as always with a great writer—it would be unfair to leave him with that label. It has often been noticed that there is a curious discrepancy between what he has to say and how he is actually saying it; in other words, we are profoundly impressed by the perspective of the ideas and events in his stories and the true ring of his statements, and at the same time vexed by his inability to attend to details of expression and technique. A talented young writer who after many hardships undergoes the experience of having his first book actually printed and then withdrawn from publication because the wife of his publisher does not like it, is not likely to look upon the world as especially well run.

As an agnostic and moral sceptic Dreiser accepted the view voiced before by writers such as Mark Twain that the motive power of man is the will to success and pleasure, limited only by tribal conventions, and that the one thing left to the onlooker is an attitude of pity for the weak or of irony for the foolish. He does not, however, make it easy for the reader to follow this principle. Especially in his most important work *An American Tragedy* (1925) the emotional effect appears much more complex. This, by the way, is also one of the reasons for the signifi-

cance of this novel. Any European reader will, of course, at the end of the book think that the title is meant to be ironical. The hero of the story is not put before two possibilities either of which will make him guilty of a crime, but he is really faced with the choice between an easy but criminal, and a difficult but honest way of life. After his failure to move upward in the social scale he starts an illicit relationship with a factory girl. Eventually, when he discovers that she is with child and that he could be accepted by a woman of greater beauty and higher social rank, he kills her. The fact that he goes to the electric chair is tragic only from the point of view of a consistent pragmatist to whom social frustration is an especially painful kind of failure.

There is nothing inevitable in this catastrophe. Clyde could find half a dozen ways out of this predicament if he only thought of them. We are not really moved to pity for Clyde—we are only vexed by and perhaps sorry for his foolishness and childish belief that material well-being and social climbing mean happiness. The deterministic element in the outlook thus appears as one of minor circumstance and ignorance rather than of the iron law of psycho-biological forces.

One cannot, however, deny that the novel has a powerful grip over the reader. The epic principle of mixing lively descriptions of everyday life with action, fast and dangerous or foolish and mean, carries the story over all impediments of style and structure. Clyde's experience as a dish-washer, a bell-hop, and a factory worker, or his clumsy way of denying the murder charge, are quite as plausible as the reaction of a District Attorney who, hearing of the suspicious circumstances connected with the accident of Clyde's fiancée, hopes for a murder case because it would give him useful publicity in an election campaign. A number of elements—the craving for social prestige and the pain of overwork, mob psychology, sensationalism and the merciless machinery of justice—are blended together to create a convincing picture of the less inspiring aspects of modern American life.

Only on rarer occasions Dreiser appears less stern in the consistency of his deterministic outlook or in the technique of presenting a character. An instance of the latter is to be found in one of his short stories 'Reina' in the collection *A Gallery of*

*Women* (1930). It is the story of a silly young woman who, instead of appreciating her husband's sincere devotion to her, overtakes his patience until to her surprise he actually leaves her. The curious point about this development is that, though the most favourable circumstances cannot change a weak character into a steady one, the heroine is by no means unhappy in a situation brought about by her own ungrateful and stupid behaviour. For once the narrator obviously enjoys the irony of the events.

In his later years Dreiser seemed to incline towards a milder form of the same fundamental attitude. Particularly in his last novel, *The Bulwark* (1946), he is evidently torn between his earlier determinism and a kind of pragmatic belief. The latter reveals itself in the way in which the hero of the story, a wealthy Quaker, acts on his belief and despite many worries connected with his family life eventually dies in peace. This persuades his daughter to gain happiness by returning to 'the inner light'. This is exactly what William James might have called religious pragmatism, that is the belief that any religious idea that creates a feeling of comfort is real. The son of the family, on the other hand, remains in the grip of his physical desires, thus presenting the earlier stages of Dreiser's outlook, and eventually takes his own life.<sup>1</sup>

JAMES T. FARRELL (born 1904) appears to be somewhere halfway between Dreiser and Dos Passos. His reputation rests chiefly on his fictional trilogy *Studs Lonigan* (1936) consisting of the novels *Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* and *Judgment Day*. It tells the story of a Chicago youth of Irish descent and Catholic background whose experiences with street gangs and 'broad's', in the poolroom and the public park, in search of love and of a job during the depression period, have that cruel quality typical of the naturalistic writer. The scene is not of the same width and grandeur of composition as in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, but it is perhaps more concentrated and grimly consistent in the gradual deterioration of the hero who, in spite of his talents and decent intentions, becomes the victim of his surroundings, undermines his health

<sup>1</sup>See Robert H. Elias: *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, New York, 1949, and F. O. Matthiessen: *Theodore Dreiser*, New York, 1951.

by drink and sexual dissipation and finally, at the age of thirty, dies of pneumonia.

Unlike Dos Passos, to whom New York appears an ever new experience, Farrell manages to take the weird background of Chicago slums much more for granted. A few scenes such as the football game developing into a riot, the closing in of the 'black belt', the horrors committed at a New Year's Eve party, the initiation of the 'Order of Christopher', remain particularly impressive, but the power of the book probably rests on the almost incredible unity of tone produced by the use of all shades and varieties in the scale of Chicago idiom and slang. If sociologists have taken *Studs Lonigan* as a source of information, philologists might do the same with even greater justification.

"She said a guy didn't have to be a sissy or yellow not to be a bum like those lousies were,"<sup>1</sup>

is only a mild example of the expression of a kind of *leit-motiv* in Studs Lonigan's ambition to be tough. And this incidentally reveals another aspect of the book and the author.

Farrell, it is true, is a Marxist and a determinist, but different from Dreiser and Caldwell, he is occasionally also inclined towards metaphysical speculations. The religious worries that Studs Lonigan undergoes at various times of his short life, especially his reactions during a religious service, remind one strongly of certain passages in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and represent elements otherwise rare in the purely proletarian novel. The author, in his *Note on Literary Criticism* (1936), though principally agreeing with the Marxian doctrine, refutes its narrow application to the interpretation of literature: this confirms the assumption that a very different vision is never far from even the most radical American empiricist as long as he belongs to the front rank.

With Farrell we have arrived at the borderline of the domain of the so-called PROLETARIAN WRITERS. This school was outstanding in the early '30s, but its decline was evident towards the end of the same decade. In this respect it shares its fate with a

<sup>1</sup>'Young Lonigan' in *Studs Lonigan*, p. 125 of the English edition (Constable), London, 1936, and p. 166 of the Modern Library edition (Random House), New York, 1938.

parallel movement in England, and very largely—though not entirely—for the same reasons. There is a curious irony in the fact that the rise of the Proletarian school seemed to prove one of its own chief maxims, that is, that letters are a product of economic conditions, whereas its decline pointed towards the supremacy of 'ideologies' over facts. There is no doubt that the economic depression of the '30s gave the Marxian doctrine the biggest chance it could possibly have had in the U.S.A., for the incomprehensible phenomena of poverty amidst plenty, and of unemployment amidst the obvious necessity to get things done, were sure symptoms of a basic defect in the economic system. And Marxism was, after all, neither logically nor emotionally very far from pragmatism. Provided one drops the assumption that beliefs however illogical can influence men against their own economic interests, the pragmatic conception that ideas are true only as they influence the actions of man, and that life is an eternal struggle for adjustment to an ever-changing reality, can easily be shifted to the level of a purely economic interpretation of the laws of history.

But this is just the point. Some theorists wonder why the Americans have not yet embraced the Marxian creed, since bankers and industrialists as well as workers and farmers are so much alike in their pragmatic outlook—and others wonder why they ever worried about it. The former are philosophical materialists who believe in the supremacy of economic conditions, the latter are fundamental idealists who think that Americans are really more concerned about their individual souls and morals than about anything else. It is, of course, futile to decide which conception is correct, since both exist side by side in the United States—and sometimes even in the same writer—which is another reason for a pluralistic explanation of their fast-changing attitudes.

There had, of course, been Marxists in American literature before the onset of the economic crisis, though one should not include in this group Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, and Sinclair Lewis, whose social criticism springs from humanitarian ideals and not from historical materialism. But even amongst genuine Marxists, few had attracted general attention before the '30s except Max Eastman. And Max Eastman (born 1883), the first in the field, was far from being a doctrinaire.

It is true that he was the editor of *The Masses*, a weekly journal with leftist tendencies founded in 1911, but he also wrote *The Enjoyment of Poetry* (1913), in which he makes the distinction of poetic and practical attitudes which dominate different types of people, a conception not easily compatible with a strictly Marxist outlook. After the First World War he became a convinced Communist, but a visit to Russia in 1922 changed him first into a Trotskyite and finally into a bitter antagonist of the Communist Party.

The title of his political study *The End of Socialism in Russia* (1937) is more than self-explanatory, and in 1938 he even declared that "every man who believes in . . . democratic civilization as against tyranny and barbarism ought to fight the American Communist Party with every weapon in his grasp . . ."<sup>1</sup> This does not necessarily mean that he had deserted Marxist ideals but it shows that he was not ready to pay the price of a totalitarian regime for the realization of the classless society. And that was really a victory of individualism.

In the '30s Granville Hicks (born 1901) became one of the leading Communist interpreters of literature and his book *The Great Tradition, an Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War* (1933), professedly written from the Marxist point of view, is one of the best attempts of its kind. He repeated the experiment in *Figures of Transition* (1939) where the same method is applied to English literature towards the end of the nineteenth century. But Hicks, too, found himself unable to stick to party doctrines and he resigned from the Communist Party in the same year.

Others, like V. F. Calverton, Joseph Freeman and Michael Gold, may have remained more strictly within orthodox Marxist lines in their critical work. But despite frequent statements that they were not sectarians and that their aims were enforced by contemporary conditions and not by any doctrines, they also limited the range of their influence on the general reading public. Whatever their minor differences of opinion, on one point Marxist critics agree and that is that all literature of any significance should have a clear social, economic or political connotation and directly or indirectly reflect the prob-

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Fred B. Millett: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, p. 338.

lems of class culture. Perhaps the very consciousness of this critical insight has prevented the self-styled Proletarian writers from producing a really outstanding and convincing work of (proletarian) art.

Albert Halper (born 1904), for instance, in his novel *Union Square* (1934) gives a very vivid picture of the lives of the inhabitants of a big apartment house near Union Square in New York and of the various types of adherents to the Communist cause. A Marxian element of the orthodox kind appears in his indictment of the pseudo-proletarian artists and intellectuals and in his belief in the superiority of the class-conscious worker. The speech along these lines by Jason is one of the high-lights of the story. Otherwise, however, the purely human elements such as the helpless love of a young girl, and the relationship of an artist to a beautiful woman attached to a Mexican, are more impressive than the scenes connected with direct social criticism.

Robert Cantwell's novel *The Land of Plenty* (1934), the scene of which is laid in a Californian lumber plant, is one of the many strike novels produced at that time, but it can hardly be said to contain anything new compared with what had already been said by such writers as Upton Sinclair, except perhaps for the elation felt by the hero in his recollection of the solidarity of the workers at the beginning of the strike. This emotional element shifts the social aspect of the book to a level of new possibilities but it cannot be said that they have been fully realized in this or any other Proletarian novel.

An interesting attempt to combine the proletarian point of view with the period element was made by Josephine Herbst in her novel *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933), which tells the adventures of a young man in the reconstruction period after the Civil War and describes the incredible difficulties he has with the corruption going on around him. But again, the moral element of the novel is, in a way, stronger than the purely sociological one. The book is thus another illustration of the principle that any good piece of writing tends to go beyond mere dogma.

An especial case, and possibly the most promising one amongst Proletarian writers, is Richard Wright (born 1909). Wright is a negro and probably the only one with an inter-



national reputation in literature. He has a consistently determinist attitude and sets it forth in a way that is practically water-tight and fearful in its plausibility. There is hardly a better introduction to the status of the *intelligent* negro in both the South and the North of U.S.A. than Wright's work, nor will a European reader easily lay down this book without realizing that here at least is one terrifying problem from which an overburdened Europe is free. Elements of heredity, of social environment both black and white, of blind chance and misdirected attempts on the part of the whites to break down the colour bar, are brought together to drive the coloured hero of *Native Son* (1940) to the murder of a white girl and of his own sweetheart until he is caught, brought to trial, and sentenced to death. The dramatic development and straightforward characterization, as well as the absence of any false sentiment or propagandistic tone, make the novel more effective than most writings in this field. The book gives one of the rare examples of what can be achieved by the technique of pure reporting applied with a consistent attitude and an adequate subject matter.<sup>1</sup>

It is remarkable that one of the few outstanding novels about the Second World War is based on a deterministic outlook. In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) by Norman Mailer, the forces that determine the events in the lives of a few soldiers are either their own psychological conditioning in childhood and adolescence or the physical factors of their natural surroundings working like blind chance. The jungle warfare in a small Pacific island held by the Japanese, is entirely seen in this two-fold perspective. The preparations to the attack and the final though largely incidental victory, the complex relationship between men and officers and amongst the men themselves, the elements of cruelty and ambition, of fear and longing, of endurance and exhaustion, of obscenity and frankness, are set forth with a consistency rare in modern fiction.

Occasionally, the technique reminds one of Dos Passos, with the difference, though, of a closer outward unity of plot, a more direct connection between the activities of the individuals and the events on a bigger scale, and an even more

<sup>1</sup>Other books by Richard Wright are: *Black Boy*, 1937 and later, and *12 Million Black Voices*, 1941.

pronounced absence of any apparent justice in the ultimate fate of each man.

Half-way between the tough and the genteel sort of determinism is the curious attitude of what might be called *pessimistic humour*. It is based on the assumption that the world is a rotten place and that the life of man consists in trying to make the best of a thoroughly bad job. This attitude forms the basis of a great many of the so-called Tall Tales of the Old South-West and is thus connected with the grimmer side of American pioneering. One of its greatest exponents was Mark Twain. An interesting point about this attitude is that it has actually found adequate expression in abstract thought, however flippantly it may have been worded and however far it seems to be from its original roots.

To an American, it may be surprising to see a link established between Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken and Erskine Caldwell, but to a distant observer the basic connection is obvious if one takes as the connecting link a statement such as this:—

- “1. The cosmos is a gigantic fly-wheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute.
2. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it.
3. Religion is the theory that the wheel was designed and set spinning to give him the ride.”

This comes from an essay entitled *Ad Imaginem Dei Creavit Illum*<sup>1</sup> by H. L. MENCKEN (born 1880), and it sums up the creed of one of the most brilliant critics American letters have ever known.

Mencken may temporarily have lost a great deal of the tremendous influence he exercised in the '20s, but it is wrong to look upon him as an exponent of the Jazz Age only. Any country is permanently in need of writers who explode illusions and prejudices, and America, which knows the dangers of standardized public opinion perhaps better than any other country in the Western world, is no exception. It has sometimes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from *Selected Prejudices, First Series* (The Travellers' Library, Jonathan Cape), London, 1926, p. 90. See also William Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace. The Life of H. L. Mencken*, New York, 1951.

been held against Mencken that his criticism is merely negative and that it does not offer any solutions, but quite apart from the fact that one cannot possibly expect to have everything done by the same writer, Mencken as an agnostic, a determinist, and a pluralist in one person, could only draw attention to the stupidity of man's conduct at home and in public and make him aware of his insignificant position in the universe. Thus he, like any other writer who has to fight against the herd instinct, is invariably in the camp of the opposition to any fashion—whether in politics, economics, ethics, education, literature or language. He opposes any ideas that threaten to become stale, or any philistine notions. Thus he thinks that the evil in this world can only be explained by the theory that the world is being run not by one Deity but by a 'board of gods' who do not agree on the lines along which it ought to be run, an argument which, incidentally, sounds like a burlesque on William James's conception of a pluralistic universe.

He gives Christianity a hope of survival only because of its appeal to the poetic sense of Man. He points out that the government of any country consists of men who are quite as stupid as anybody and should therefore leave as much liberty as possible to the individual. He defends the poor capitalists against a socialism which is "simply the degenerate capitalism of bankrupt capitalists". He defines love as "a temporary lull in the ever-active disgust of other people's bad habits" and draws the inevitable conclusions in the relationship of men and women. But above all he fought for the recognition of such writers as Eugene O'Neill, Carl Sandburg, and Sherwood Anderson. All this was done from 1923 to 1933 in the period of his editorship of the *American Mercury*, the strongest critical force at the time. His acute awareness of the power and the traps of language made him write his invaluable book *The American Language*, the standard work on the subject, and in his memoirs *Happy Days* (1940) and *Newspaper Days* (1940), it becomes evident that, like so many other satirists, he is really a good fellow at heart. However, it will probably be some years before he is fully recognized again.

It was in Mencken's *American Mercury* that a short story entitled, *Hatrack*, written by Herbert Ashburn, appeared in April 1926. Though now almost entirely forgotten, it created

an immense stir in its day because here for the first time such a delicate theme as the life of a prostitute in a small American town was treated in a satirical, even seemingly flippant, way. It has to be mentioned here only as one of the possible links between the attitude and the tone of Mencken and those of Erskine Caldwell, just as the short stories of Ring Lardner (1885-1933) with their sarcastic and outwardly amusing description of the life and habits of people in the jazz age concealed a fundamentally pessimistic attitude towards human character.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that ERSKINE CALDWELL (born 1903) does for the poor whites of the South what Farrell did for the lower middle classes of Chicago. But in spite of the similarity of the subject matter, the tone is quite different. Caldwell's best known novel *Tobacco Road* (1932) which, with considerable changes, has also been turned into one of the most successful plays of the New York stage and into a movie, gives an impressive picture of the life of the family of an impoverished share-cropper in Georgia. Utter ignorance, helplessness and depravity destroy whatever tiny chances of improving their situation happen to fall to them.

In this novel the man and his wife perish in a fire, in the play the wife is run over by a car, and in the film the two are sent to a hospital. The fact that the ending can be easily changed without affecting the whole is sufficient evidence that the determinism of the author is one of circumstance rather than of cause and effect. It might even be considered a serious artistic defect if it were not counterbalanced by another quality deriving from the very same basis, namely, the extraordinary kind of grim humour arising from a contrast of circumstance, particularly of events, and the reactions they cause in the characters. The events chiefly centre upon all kinds of physical relationships between male and female as the only kind of pleasure that is left to the utter poverty of the people in question. An element of naivety is most frequently used to

<sup>1</sup>See *Round Up. The Stories of Ring Lardner* (Charles Scribner's Sons) New York, 1929.—A detailed study of his work is to be found in Maxwell Geismar: *Writers in Crisis. The American Novel Between Two Wars*, Boston, 1942, pp. 3-35. See also *The Portable Ring Lardner*, edited and with an Introduction by Gilbert Seldes (The Viking Press), New York, 1943.

produce such effects. Thus Ty Ty, the farmer who is digging for gold in the novel *God's Little Acre* (1933), happens to surprise a couple of lovers without understanding what is going on. In *Journeyman* (1935) a travelling lay preacher, who is obviously also a crook of the first order, not only cheats his host out of his last penny by means of loaded dice, but also seduces his wife practically under his very eyes. The description of the religious hysteria at a meeting conducted by the same preacher at the end of the story only enhances the effect of the almost incredible that is so often found in Caldwell's books.

In this connection, the link between that kind of story telling and the so-called Tall Tales of the Old South-West, where the most outrageous things are narrated in a perfectly free and easy way, becomes especially evident. The result of this technique is that with the notable exception of *Trouble in July* (1940), which contains the weird story of a lynching, and a few short stories, the reader as a rule does not associate the lives of the characters described with unhappiness, even if murder or manslaughter may occur as they do in *God's Little Acre*.<sup>1</sup>

It needs a step back to recollect the inner relationship between the writers discussed in this chapter and EDITH WHARTON, and yet, as has been pointed out, the difference, striking as it may seem at first, is one of social class and style rather than of fundamental views. Especially in her earlier work, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is chiefly concerned with the overpowering effect of social and tribal conventions on the individual. She adheres to the assumption that the reality of these conventions is stronger than Man, who, though he may not always perish in this conflict, will be fatally injured in his happiness. If, in addition to this conception the role played in her novels by blind chance is taken into account, the criteria of a determinist attitude are obvious. It may, however, be necessary to point out that for those readers to whom the cruelty

<sup>1</sup>A useful selection of some of Caldwell's best writing is given in *The Caldwell Caravan* which contains the novels *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, as well as twenty short stories (The World Publishing Company), New York, 1946. Estimates of Erskine Caldwell include Joseph Warren Beach: *American Fiction 1920-1940* (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1942, pp. 219-249, and Maurice-Edgard Coindreau: *Aperçus de littérature américaine* (Gallimard) Paris, 1946, pp. 147-175.

of social conventions is not a reality, a good deal of Edith Wharton's art will be lost. She is distinguished from the naturalistic school of writers by her choice of subject material, which is mainly taken from the sphere of upper class society, and by the reticence of her tone which derives from the tradition of W. D. Howells and Henry James.

The best known and probably the most typical instance of her early work is *The House of Mirth* (1905). This novel relates the story of a young and attractive woman who, though belonging to New York society, is practically left penniless after the death of her parents. Her plans to secure a wealthy husband fail and the imprudence of accepting money from a man of doubtful reputation is her undoing. Her friends begin to desert her and she is forced to earn her living as a milliner, becomes ill, and dies, a few hours before her one true friend arrives to try to rescue her. The theme is not only that of downright bad luck, but of frustrated social and personal ambition, combined with the idea that appearances and codes of behaviour are more important than morals. Put this way, the connection with, say, Dreiser's *American Tragedy* is unmistakable.

Later on in her life, however, apparently following the rule with determinists amongst American writers, Edith Wharton broke the iron ring of her own system by introducing elements foreign to her previous way of thinking. In *Ethan Frome* (1911), undoubtedly her most disciplined piece of writing, a sense of duty prevents the hero of the story from starting an illicit relationship with a girl living in the same household and from deserting his ailing wife. Their attempted suicide results in the two lovers being crippled for life and having to live with the woman who hates them. And in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) the theme of passion frustrated by social conventions gains more depth by a gradual realization of other non-empirical influences.

The hero fails in his attempts to unite himself with the one woman he loves, first, because he cannot face the consequences of a broken engagement, later, on account of a feeling of duty towards his own wife, and finally, when he would be entirely free, because he decides to live with a dream rather than with reality. This device adds considerably to the development of the novel, and it becomes evident that through such

methods Edith Wharton also paved the way for those writers whose interests point towards man's position between experience and vision rather than towards factual reality only. The quality of her writing, however, will always be connected with her masterly way of describing a smooth surface and letting the reader guess the emotional storm below, or of creating an atmosphere of ambiguous feelings without permitting the reader to take sides prematurely. There is, after all, something in a genteel tradition.<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy to connect the writings of quite a number of successful novelists of the present age with the kind of attitude described here. Ellen Glasgow (1874-1945), for instance, is generally considered a regionalist writer. The heroine of one of her best novels, *Barren Ground* (1925), is "held fast by circumstances as by invisible wires of steel"<sup>2</sup> and has her own love thwarted, but succeeds materially at the price of killing her emotional life. There is also J. P. Marquand, in whose novels the modern descendants of New England Puritans struggle against the codes of their families and invariably succumb to them.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See also Edward K. Brown: *Edith Wharton. Etude Critique*, Paris, 1935, and Percy Lubbock: *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, New York, 1947.

<sup>2</sup>Ellen Glasgow: *Barren Ground*, Virginia Edition, 1938, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>John P. Marquand: *The Late George Apley*, 1937; *Wickford Point*, 1939; *H. M. Pulham, Esq.*, 1941.

## CHAPTER II

### THE QUEST FOR TRADITION

#### *Historical Consciousness* •

OF all the non-pragmatic elements that appear in modern American thought, the one most immediately noticeable is the powerful, though often unconscious, urge to create a tradition. To any European visitor to the United States, this may come as a surprise because one of the most frequent, though entirely unjustified generalizations about America is that it looks to the future only, and never to the past. And yet, if one realizes how much care is taken in America to preserve old buildings, how proud people are if they own a piece of eighteenth- or even nineteenth-century furniture called 'Early American', what efforts have gone into the restoration of such places as Williamsburg, Virginia—then the first symptoms of the peculiar quality of the American love of the past become evident.

Nor is this an isolated phenomenon. Attempts to create a closed society on the basis of old families in opposition to the new and merely rich, as in the case of the Boston Brahmin,<sup>1</sup> institutions such as that of the 'Daughters of the American Revolution', even a millionaire's hobby to keep a 'dude ranch' and ride around with leather japs and a six-shooter, are signs of a related conservative attitude based on a more or less pronounced historical consciousness—not to speak of the grimmer aspects such as the attempts to revive the Ku-Klux-Klan. Much of this may be sheer playfulness or reactionary humdrum, but viewed in the light of what American writing has produced in the twentieth century it is certainly not without significance.

It is not easy to decide whether the tremendous output of historical and period fiction or the astonishing amount of

<sup>1</sup>See John Gunther: *Inside U.S.A.* (Harper & Bros.), New York and London, 1947, p. 461.



scholarly research into American history is more important, but the fact remains that both types of writing are the obvious result of universal appeal to the instincts of tradition. This sort of 'historical literature', to use a term that covers the two aspects, is, of course, not by any means a modern invention. Some of the great American classics such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, not to speak of historians such as Prescott and Motley, had started a tradition that like most other fundamental conceptions had, in part, originated in Europe, but soon went entirely its own way, and it is a remarkable fact that then, as now, American 'historical literature' showed occasionally a tendency to link itself with metaphysical speculations as if this field afforded an especially secure basis for flights into the unknown.

This pronounced preoccupation with the past may be interpreted as a kind of escapism, but it would be wrong to pin everything in this field down to such a facile explanation. In many cases the reasons are much deeper, and the least one can say is that they are much more diverse in their connections with other attitudes of the American consciousness. Though the work of HENRY ADAMS (1838-1918) lies outside the scope of the present study, it is well to remember that his two books *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1905-13) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907-18) belong to the few attempts made by a professional historian in the Anglo-Saxon world to present a fully developed philosophy of history.

Adams, with his enormous knowledge of history and practical experience in politics, is profoundly worried by the question what ultimate forces are at the back of a historical development that has led with ever-increasing speed from the unity of thought represented in thirteenth-century civilization to the 'multiverse' and chaotic state of the modern age. The application of the results of contemporary natural science led him to the belief that the history of man is not evolution towards perfection, but towards dissolution and decay. When Christian faith began to give in to the increased control of man over the forces of nature, a possibility of a new religious thought might have come into existence, of which the dynamo, as opposed to the Holy Virgin of the Middle Ages, would have

been the appropriate symbol. Science, however, began even to throw down the principle of design in nature, and to declare that all the apparent order in the universe is purely accidental. The best proof of the chaotic nature of things is, according to Adams, that man ever tries to revolt against any established order. This is a kind of scepticism rarely found in American thought, and Adams's position is even more unique if one remembers that the determinists, to whom he is more closely related than to any other school of thought, found it difficult to go without any hope whatever.

It is therefore not surprising that, in spite of his extraordinary achievement and the admiration with which his work is quoted, Adams does not seem to have had the influence on twentieth-century American thought which might have been expected. His scepticism, justified as it may be in view of the present situation, is probably just a shade too strong to be accepted by a fundamentally melioristic set of historians. For that is what the overwhelming majority of American historians are, whether Liberal or Marxist, romantic or realistic, and whether they are political, economic, social or literary historians.

### *History of Ideas and Literary Criticism*

Of all the historians those working in the field of thought and letters<sup>1</sup> are of particular interest in the present context, not only because of their subject material but also because of their conscious attempt to interpret the development of American Literature as an expression of the growth of the American mind. It is well to remember that the general recognition of American literature as a field independent from English literature occurred at a comparatively late date. Harvard University, for example, did not know the institution of separate courses on American literature until the '30s. It is therefore not surprising that, with a few notable exceptions, the first single-handed attempts at a complete history of American literature (or at least of some of its branches or phases) were, above all, intelligent collections of material based

<sup>1</sup>There is an exceedingly instructive study of this field by Howard Mumford Jones: *The Theory of American Literature* (Cornell Univ. Press), Ithaca, New York, 1948.

on the general assumption that history, including literary history, means differentiation and progress.

Instances of this type are the writings of Stuart P. Sherman and William Peterfield Trent, F. L. Pattee and Arthur H. Quinn, the former two acting together with John Erskine and Carl Van Doren as editors of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–20). This work may be considered the culmination point of the first phase, during which attempts at the history of ideas proper, such as that given by Isaac Woodbridge Riley in his book *American Thought from Puritanism to Pragmatism* (1915 and 1923), were still exceptional.

Soon, however, the view-points in such enterprises became more variegated and more pronounced and there is little doubt that American literary criticism did much to clarify the situation. Critics like W. C. Brownell, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Henry Seidel Canby, lent a hand in indicating new ways of evaluating the past, whilst H. L. Mencken played a vital part in making the public aware of the inherent possibilities in contemporary literature. Thus the literary historians were able to venture on new paths in interpreting the past, and it is remarkable how the various contemporary attitudes reflect themselves in their works. Vernon Louis Parrington in his magnificent *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–30) adopts a predominantly pragmatic and melioristic view of the progress of thought and letters and connects it with the social, political and economic development of the country, which, in its turn, found equally progressive interpreters in *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927) by Charles and Mary Beard, in the twelve volumes of the *History of American Life* (1927–44) edited by A. M. Schlesinger and D. R. Fox, and in *The Saga of American Society* by Dixon Wecter (1937).

An attempt to combine literary history with cultural history in general was also made by Percy H. Boynton in *Literature and American Life* (1936). Partly under the influence of the doctrines of Freud a predominantly psychological approach was taken by Waldo Frank in *The Re-Discovery of America* (1928), and, with occasionally deterministic leanings, especially by Ludwig Lewisohn in *Expressions in America* (1932), whilst Van Wyck Brooks in his brilliant analysis of the different periods of American literature gradually followed a more

moderate line and combined it with sociological elements.<sup>1</sup> Useful though not always consistently applied terms in the classification of movements were provided by Norman Foerster for a whole group of scholars in *A Reinterpretation of American Literature* (1928), and there was also the Marxist point of view adopted by V. F. Calverton in *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932) and by Granville Hicks in *The Great Tradition* (1933).<sup>2</sup>

Though in all these attempts a certain amount of literary evaluation is evident the predominance of the non-aesthetic criteria and categories is significant. An exception are Lewis Mumford's books, especially *The Golden Day* (1926), in which the conception of writing as an art is more clearly discernible. As a result of this development the need for greater critical penetration and a more conscious method of evaluation made itself strongly felt and it coincided with the appearance of new, though divergent, forces in literary history and criticism. It is here that Southern critics begin to play an important role in the new development, and it testifies to the inner connection between the special field of literary criticism and the general quest for tradition that—to use a paradox—the conservative elements became the progressive ones. It began in the shape of regionalist criticism as early as 1922 with the periodical *The Fugitive* (1922–5) edited by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and others, absorbed sociological elements in the symposium *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) by twelve Southerners, and found its full vigour with the founding of *The Kenyon Review* (1938), the reorganization of the *Sewanee Review* (1944), as well as in *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936) and *Reason in Madness* (1941) by Allen Tate, and *The New Criticism* (1941) by John Crowe Ransom. The periodical *American Literature* (since 1928), exclusively devoted to scholarly studies in this field, has its home at a southern university (Durham, N.C.).

In these essays the discussion of the formal aspects of a literary work of art becomes more and more important, and in this effort the Southern leaders were joined by a number of critics of such different origins as Robert Penn Warren,

<sup>1</sup>Van Wyck Brooks: *The Flowering of New England*, 1936; *New England: Indian Summer*, 1940; *The World of Washington Irving*, 1944; *The Time of Melville and Whitman*, 1947.

<sup>2</sup>The Marxist trend is discussed in Chapter I, p. 46 of the present study.

Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, Eric Bentley, Malcolm Cowley, Philip Rahv, Fred B. Millett, and Edmund Wilson despite his Marxist and psychoanalytical leanings.<sup>1</sup> All this has led to a greater awareness of the fundamental problems of literary criticism and to a livelier discussion of its methods than ever before. Evidence of this is to be found in the thoroughgoing analysis of all possible approaches to literature given by Austin Warren and René Wellek in *Theory of Literature* (1949).

There is no doubt that this preoccupation with the function of literary criticism and the search for new standards are largely sustained by historical consciousness and subconsciousness. It is the will to come to a clearer understanding of the permanent values of American civilization that lies behind all these efforts. This connects them with the more recent attempts to concentrate on special aspects of the history of American thought and letters and thus to penetrate to greater depths.

Mention must be made here of the work of Bernard Smith, *Forces in American Criticism* (1939), Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (1939), F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941), Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (1942), Ferner Nuhn, *The Wind Blew From the East: A Study in the Orientation of American Culture* (1940-2), Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry. An Anthropologist Looks at America* (1942), Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (1943), Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), Howard Mumford Jones, *Ideas in America* (1944), Herbert W. Schneider, *History of American Philosophy* (1946), W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1946), and Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind. An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880s* (1950). The new and comprehensive *Literary History of the United States*, edited in three volumes by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, Howard Mumford Jones, Dixon Wecter, and Stanley T. Williams (1948), may well be considered the crowning effort in this field.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See the Anthology: *Literary Opinion in the United States*, edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel, New York, 1937.

<sup>2</sup>No mention is made here of the numerous and often brilliant efforts

*Period Fiction*

Whilst the historians of ideas have made a lasting contribution to the field of American thought, it remains doubtful whether the *period novelists* will achieve more than ephemeral fame. Their case is, perhaps, rather one for the sociologists than for the literary critics, for the tremendous commercial success of the period novel seems to be in almost exactly inverse proportion to the critical esteem it has received. And yet, who could doubt that this success is the best proof of a deep-seated desire of the public for the building-up of an American myth? If one considers the fact that in American fiction most best-sellers in the last twenty years have been period novels, the impact of that kind of writing on the mind of the public cannot be disputed. On the other hand, a glimpse at the development of this strange phenomenon confirms the suspicion that it is on the whole a sub-literary species though one from which millions of readers derive a wider, if undoubtedly less correct, knowledge, of the past. For the past is patient, and one can do with it what one likes. Especially one can present it in a way that creates an outlet for the nostalgia of those who are dissatisfied with the present. Whatever modern man may miss in adventure or ideal, in chivalry or romance, he can project into the past. And if the process is connected with the method of a fairly plausible modern psychology, its success may rest assured.

The modern period novel has swept across the American reading public in two waves. The first came with the turn of the century and reached its peak in the publications of Winston Churchill (born 1871). In spite of the element of sentimentality

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by European writers to analyse various aspects of the American mind, though it is difficult not to comment on books such as *The American Problem* (1944), and *American Themes* (1948) by D. W. Brogan, and *The American People. A Study in National Character* (1948) by Geoffrey Gorer, as well as on the interpretation of the different aspects of United States civilization by E. Baumgarten, F. Bruns, Walther Fischer, W. P. Friederich, Hermann Keyserling, S. B. Liljegen, H. Lüdeke, André Maurois, Gustav E. Müller, Gunnar Myrdal, F. Schönmann, André Siegfried, M. Silberschmidt, A. C. Ward, and others. A number of the earlier attempts in this field are discussed by William T. Spoerri in *The Old World and the New. A Synopsis of Current European Views on American Civilization*, Zürich, 1936. See also Harry Levin: 'Some European Views of Contemporary American Literature' in *American Quarterly*, Vol. I, No. 3, Autumn 1949.

which, at times, makes the reading of his novels almost impossible, Churchill had at least a serious aim and a profound interest in the political and social conduct of his contemporaries. He devoted a good deal of his energy to the improvement of the political set-up of New Hampshire, and stopped writing novels because, after the First World War, his views underwent a radical change towards the conception of Christian love and a belief in life after death. Though this change is no contradiction of what he wrote in the days of his greatest fame, one certainly would not necessarily expect it from the contents of his novels.

*Richard Carvel* (1899) sold almost a million copies,<sup>1</sup> and yet the present generation knows hardly anything of the book or the author. It is remarkable, though, that then, as now, the periods of the revolution and the Civil War appeared to be the most popular subjects of that sort of fiction. Thus, the scene of *Richard Carvel* is partly America and partly the London of Charles James Fox, and it contains the usual ingredients such as adventures at sea, unrequited love, friendship after a duel, and a beautiful and capricious heroine with whom the hero is duly united. *The Crisis* (1901), on the other hand, has as its background the Civil War and the city of St. Louis and deals with the worries of those who have personal ties across the political division, whilst in *The Crossing* (1904) the time just after the revolution is connected with the promising theme of the settlement of the continent.

All these are subjects that have been taken up again and again since Churchill's days, but most of the books and their authors have already been forgotten. Their fate does not predict longevity for the best-sellers of the second wave of period fiction that began in the middle of the '20s and has drenched the reading public even more thoroughly than the first one. Moreover, it has not yet come to an end. The fact that it has been going on now for more than twenty years may be due to the greater variety of accessory elements used by the authors and this, of course, must on the whole be looked upon as an improvement of the species as such.

The individual cases, however, leave one often with a

<sup>1</sup>See FRANK B. MILLETT: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, p. 297.

feeling of the utmost dissatisfaction, and it is not surprising that some of them, in spite of a world-wide reputation in the days of their publication, have already suffered the fate of their predecessors at the beginning of the century. Such is the case of HERVEY ALLEN'S novel *Anthony Adverse* (1933) which, together with Hugh Walpole's novels in England, did perhaps most to intensify the demand of the public for period fiction, with a strongly picaresque element. Hervey Allen (1889-1949), who also wrote a remarkable biography of Poe<sup>1</sup> and some poetry, knew, of course, what he was doing when he drafted the scheme of a novel that was to run to some twelve hundred pages. He chose the time of the Napoleonic wars, and Europe, Africa and America as a background, as well as a hero to whom practically everything happens.

Anthony grows up at Leghorn in Italy, becomes a successful young business man, has his first sexual experience, travels to Cuba and Africa as a slave-trader and keeps a negro mistress, becomes a wealthy and influential banker, meets Napoleon, moves to Spain and from there to New Orleans, gets married but loses his family and his house through an accident, becomes a hermit, is taken prisoner by Spanish soldiers and sent to Mexico, meets his former love again and marries her, and dies eventually of the results of an accidental injury. The redeeming feature of the story is the attempt to create a kind of symbolism to express the idea that an emotional relationship to the Absolute, in the image of the Virgin Mary, has more meaning and force than a merely rational one. To this may be added a profound sympathy with the southern world, both in the European and American sense of the word, and an intelligent and delicate use of allegory in the description of the relationship of the sexes.

This sounds—in part at least—like a belief in metaphysical values, but it goes hand in hand with the pragmatic view of life that expresses itself in the astonishingly clever and successful adjustment of the hero to whatever circumstance he finds himself set against. This is probably the reason for a kind of rift that seems to run through the whole story and that expresses itself outwardly by the impression that a great many events,

<sup>1</sup>Hervey Allen: *Israfel, the Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, 1926.



especially of the disastrous kind, seem to be of entirely accidental nature and, therefore, annoying rather than tragic. But it is equally a sign that 'historical literature' lends itself easily to non-pragmatic conceptions, whatever the ultimate aims of the writer.

It is remarkable, though, that the most successful and fastest-selling novel of the present age has been a period novel with a purely pragmatic outlook on life. *Gone with the Wind* (1936) by MARGARET MITCHELL (1900-49), in spite of its glaring weaknesses, is at least consistent on that one point. It is true that the heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, modelled after Becky Sharp, has to run through three husbands to realize that the one man she idolizes and never gets is a creation of her dreams rather than of reality, but her indomitable energy in overcoming every difficulty and her supreme power of adjustment are instances of those qualities that make a life materially successful, whatever price has to be paid in the truly tender relationship of love. Thus, Scarlett marries her first husband out of spite, her second for his money, and her third in what might be called a confusion of feelings. The first is mortally wounded in the war, the second killed in a brawl of the Ku-Klux-Klan, the third runs away because she does not realize the depth of his love for her. She has to undergo dire poverty and every kind of hardship during and after the Civil War, but her spirits, supported by her naive selfishness, remain undaunted.

Some have found in this toughness of character the explanation for the phenomenal success of the book; others see it in the Byronic aspect of the third husband, Rhett Butler, though this would especially appeal to the sentimental portion of the cinema-going public of the fair sex, yearning for a reckless and romantically wicked lover instead of a reliable but boring husband. It is also possible that the make-believe realism of the background, with that blend of historic accuracy and a shot of magnolia myth, played its part in the fame of the book. But in view of the incredible length and the tiresome repetitions of the novel, it is difficult to attribute its reception to anything but an ideal fusion of the pragmatic current and the love of the past in the modern American reading public, which will always be ready to indulge in, as well as to overcome, a dream.

The case of KENNETH ROBERTS (born 1885), is a different one. More careful in the use of the purely picaresque and symbolic elements than Hervey Allen, and less conventional in characterization and outlook than Margaret Mitchell, he has not only done valuable research work in his field, but actually helped to correct the one-sidedness of the conventional picture of certain aspects of American history in his fiction. Though his novels also suffer from unnecessary repetitions and occasional lags, they have a definite advantage over most other period novels, and this is the unobtrusive introduction of a fundamental human problem—namely the clash of the attitude of loyalty with independent pragmatic judgment in one and the same person. This happens in *Arundel* (1930), with Benedict Arnold as a hero, and its sequel *Rabble in Arms* (1933), it occurs in *North West Passage* (1937), and it permeates *Oliver Wiswell* (1940). It is true that this conception does not appear to be strong enough to lift these novels to the plane of an irrational and feverish search for some kind of non-pragmatic values as, say, in Thomas Wolfe's novels, but it carries enough weight to keep the intelligent reader's attention and sympathy through the stories.

*Oliver Wiswell* is perhaps the most interesting attempt of the four, because it presents the well-known events of the American revolution from the unusual angle of loyalist sympathies and therefore makes them appear in an entirely new light. The fact that the rebels appear very much as discontented lower-class rowdies is counter-balanced by the incredible mistakes made through bad organization and incompetent leadership on the part of the English. Indeed, the most impressive passages of the book are perhaps those that show how through the stupidity of individual military leaders and bureaucratic mismanagement not only minor fights but a whole war may be lost, though the cause as such, and the underlying forces of the defeated, may be quite sound.

It is perhaps this contrast between the unpragmatic adherence to a lost cause and the pragmatic explanation of its being lost which lends the book a certain suspense. Compared with the power of this idea and the events centring upon it, some aspects of the novel, such as the love story of Oliver and Sally, appear unimportant, whilst others, depending on the main

theme, such as the characterization of the ingenious Buell, who knows all the tricks of the underworld, probably gain by it.

The above-mentioned examples of period fiction must suffice for the interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole. From the point of view of pure literary criticism, there would be a number of others that might be mentioned with as much or even more justification, from James Boyd's *Drums* (1925) and *Marching On* (1927) to Mackinlay Kantor's *Long Remember* (1934) and *Arouse and Beware* (1936), from Walter D. Edmonds's *Drums along the Mohawk* (1936) to A. B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky* (1947), from Caroline Gordon's *Penhally* (1931) to Kathleen Windsor's *Forever Amber* (1946).

It is possible that in the most recent development of the period novel certain symptoms of an approaching change can be discovered. The fact that the novel *The Big Sky* probably owes its success to its kinship with the 'hard-boiled' or tough school of writers of the late '20s and early '30s, and *Forever Amber* to its erotic passages, might be interpreted as a result of the need to introduce new elements at all costs, to keep the species going. But it is also a sign that 'historical literature' will assimilate anything to feed the demands of a public consciousness so keenly set on the past.

### *Regionalism*

In this connection, mention must be made of what is generally referred to as '*regionalism*' in fiction. As the plan of the present book is not based on the subject material of the books discussed but on the attitudes of their authors, the regionalist writers appear in the corresponding chapters. In a way, almost every modern American novelist is at the same time a regionalist, for the simple reason that the majority of authors, whether they believe in the power of reality or not, resort to their own world of experience for their subject material, and as they come from all parts of the States, they have signally contributed to a deeper knowledge of almost every region of their country.

In this way, authors of such totally different outlook and method as, say, James T. Farrell and Eudora Welty, can be looked upon as regionalists, because, whatever their ultimate aims, the reader is given a vivid picture of Chicago life in the

books of the former, and of the Mississippi Delta in those of the latter. It is true that in some cases the background of the stories seems to be dealt with in a more careful and personal way than in others, and then the term 'regionalists' appears to be especially appropriate. The decisive point is that critics as well as the reading public often try to understand and judge an author by the quality of his regional elements. This makes the topic relevant in the present chapter, for the stress on regionalism is just another powerful symptom of that quest for a national tradition based on a profound love for the variety of its ethnographical aspects. What historical literature expresses in terms of time and age, regional literature reflects in terms of space and locality.

In this respect the work of WILLA CATHER (1875-1947) deserves especial mention, not only because she combines regionalist and period elements in a more plausible and attractive way than most other writers, but also because, of all the twentieth-century novelists, she was the first to reintroduce other forgotten metaphysical values into 'realistic' fiction. She is, therefore, also a writer of metempirical conceptions, starting as it were from an analysis of immigrant surroundings and proceeding to a vision of generally valid ideas. That she was successful in doing so, is undoubtedly due to the quiet and unobtrusive way in which she set about it, as well as to the hidden strength of her beliefs.

These beliefs may not sound very original if enumerated in the abstract. To be true to oneself, to be natural, wise, and detached, whatever one's upbringing and station in life, to follow the principle of loving kindness, in short, to practise a kind of Christian humanism, regardless of purely conventional morals—these are conceptions that almost anyone will accept in theory as a matter of course, though few may realize how strongly they will, in practice, clash with the equally well-accepted principle of pragmatism as the doctrine of how to be successful. This clash is hardly ever evident in Willa Cather's books, though the struggle for survival in pioneering is a favourite subject of hers. If the decision has to be made, it is generally a quiet one, often in the form of a separation of characters, the lovable one adhering to one of these values, the less likable one to the doctrine of material success, or

nursing a feeling of resentment. This may account for a certain stillness of atmosphere in her novels, a stillness, however, that is full of warmth and that creates a kind of nostalgia in the reader for the happiness of those acting on the good principles.

It seems likely that *My Ántonia* (1918) will go down to posterity as her greatest achievement. There is a subtle simplicity about her fundamental views that permeates a subject material of general human interest and creates that peculiar unit of tone and temperament that one finds so rarely in modern fiction. It is the story of a Bohemian family settling as farmers in Nebraska and undergoing all the hardships of physical and social adjustment, and particularly of the girl Ántonia Shimerda, who grows up in this environment first to become a 'hired girl' in a town, where she has an unhappy affair with a railway conductor who leaves her with a child, then to go back to farm work and to find fulfilment in her marriage with a fellow-countryman and to rear a large family.

There is nothing very extraordinary about all this. It might be just one of the many tales of immigrant life, were it not for the quality of individual scenes depicting the relationship between the foreign girl and her American boy friend, scenes of childhood, with all the charm of naive adventure, and the growing awareness of the characters' personalities. Above all, however, it is the technique of having the story told by a narrator, 'the American boy' who is socially of a higher rank and outwardly more successful, that adds a vital element to the atmosphere of the book. For it is through him that the scale of values appears in a new light. He has been a lifelong friend of Ántonia's, and the admiration he feels for her is sustained by the knowledge that the girl, in spite of all the set-backs that befall her, is ultimately happier than he, because she has remained truer to her own nature. The only certainty that he can find in his life is that he and Ántonia possess together "the precious, the incommunicable past".<sup>1</sup>

It is, indeed, the precious past which gradually was to become the general source of Willa Cather's further work, and which places her in the neighbourhood of the legion of period novelists. The quest for tradition—in itself a value of non-

<sup>1</sup>See Willa Cather: *My Ántonia* (Houghton Mifflin Company), Boston and New York, 1926, p. 419.

empirical origin—is, however, in Willa Cather's case, never the sole law to which she submits, though it may be so strong that other aspects of her work may easily be dimmed by it. At least in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), a story about the mission of the Catholic Church in New Mexico, and in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), a novel about the life of Canadian settlers in the eighteenth century, the whole of the past and its conservative forces seem to outweigh the purely human elements, though the latter are, fortunately, never absent.

It is quite possible that these novels, though at present more widely appreciated than other books by Willa Cather, will sooner be forgotten than, say, *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), or *Obscure Destinies* (1932). For here we have characters and situations of a much more general validity. The gracefulness and charm of a Marion Forrester who ignores conventional morals, and thus appears as a 'lost lady' to some of her friends, are accepted because she combines it with warmth and kindness and, above all, because she remains, like Antonia, true to her own self.

In *The Professor's House*, the values that determine the actions of the various characters are more intricately inter-related. In fact, the unusual structure of the book, which has given cause for a certain amount of criticism because, at first sight, it seems to fall into two unrelated sections, is definitely the result of the attempt to arrive at an elucidation of non-rational influences in a person's life. Tom Outland's story about the discovery of Indian antiquities in a deserted canyon city and their sale by his friend, is really a parable of the conflict between a radically idealistic and scientific attitude on the one hand, and a pragmatic one on the other, with the result that the values of faith and friendship offered by the well-meaning pragmatist are refused by the uncompromising idealist who is right in principle, but wrong in practice. It is the recollection of this episode that illustrates the attitude of the professor, who has to find his own way between the claims of the idealistic sphere of his work, coupled with the will to be left alone, and those of the none too smooth set-up of his family life. The repressed conflict becomes so strong that it has an almost suicidal effect on him, but the reality of the quiet ~~case~~ of an old servant saves him in the physical and spiritual sense of the word.

The triumph of the values of wisdom and loving kindness is also the theme of the novelette 'Neighbor Rosicky' in *Obscure Destinies* (1932), the story of an immigrant Bohemian farmer in the Middle West whose understanding helps to bridge the gulf between his socially superior daughter-in-law Polly and his own sons, and it is further to be found in *Sapphira and the Slave-girl* (1940), a novel in which a coloured servant-girl escapes the rakish intentions of an irresponsible good-for-nothing through the help of an understanding miller and his daughter. There may be a touch of the unreal about this last-mentioned book, arising from something that might be considered an underrating of the incalculable in such happenings, but this defect is probably of smaller importance than a certain tendency towards the purely episodic that occasionally threatens the unity of Willa Cather's novels. It is the price that has to be paid for the high quality of atmosphere in individual scenes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See also Mildred R. Bennett: *The World of Willa Cather*, New York, 1951, and Hæly Bernard: *Le Roman Régionaliste aux États-Unis*, Montreal, 1949.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FATE OF MAN

#### *The Philosophical Approach*

A CONSIDERABLE part of modern American literature arises from the fundamental question "What is Man?" If this question is put from a pragmatic or deterministic point of view it inevitably changes into the one "How does man behave within given surroundings?" Some of the answers supplied are to be found in the chapters on 'The Individual and the Social Scene' and 'The Aftermath of Determinism'. But a great number of very prominent writers obviously take a point of view that is neither pragmatic nor determinist but which appears to be connected with other elements of human thought. Some of them are plainly interested in man's destiny in the infinite, and if they are philosophers, their concern is often with those values that philosophical idealism or Christian tradition have accepted as a basis for the understanding of man's position in the universe. Thinkers such as Royce, Paul Elmer More, Reinhold Niebuhr, a poet like T. S. Eliot, and a dramatist and novelist like Thornton Wilder, would have to be mentioned here. Another group such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner and others tries to approach the mystery of man by probing as deeply as possible into all the hidden recesses of his soul. And a third group appears to be trying to bridge the gulf between the conception of a hard reality and a vision of the meaning of life and death, as well as to search for new values. This is the field of writers such as Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, Steinbeck, Robert Penn Warren, and a number of others.

What keeps all these writers together in spite of their strong individual differences, is their preoccupation with something that goes beyond experience. In this respect they can look back on a magnificent tradition embodied in the names of Jonathan Edwards, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, a tradition that had almost come to an end towards the beginning of the twentieth century but underwent a splendid revival in the '30s and '40s.



That revival was in itself a struggle due to the indifference with which metaphysical conceptions were received by a reading public used to almost exclusively pragmatic and melioristic arguments.

In some cases these difficulties proved to be so great that some of the most prominent representatives of that type found it impossible to remain in America and turned to Europe. Henry James and T. S. Eliot, however different in outlook, are the best known instances. But also the expatriate group of writers with Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, and later Henry Miller, who lived in France after the First World War, are more nearly related to non-pragmatic attitudes. And finally, the strange fate of Melville, whose books had to be rediscovered after a period of almost complete oblivion, is another symptom of the same shift of stress from the pragmatic to the metaphysical aspect of appreciation. It is possible that the whole process is, in a larger perspective, nothing but a kind of reawakening of the New England spirit of the Colonial period, a secularized sort of puritanism worrying about predestination, temptation, sin, and death, under new cloaks; which would also explain its greater affinity to European thought.

It may be surprising that in abstract thought the modern metaphysical trend has not quite received the treatment one might expect in view of the strength of the movement in literature. It is not easy to name a modern American philosopher of the rank of a William James or a John Dewey to counterbalance what pragmatism has achieved in its own field. This is perhaps a result of the gap in the development of American metaphysics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, if one regarded Alfred North Whitehead as an American, the case would be different, but Whitehead conceived his essential ideas when still in England and considered himself more closely connected with the tradition of English thought.<sup>1</sup>

The beginnings of the new metaphysical efforts are generally attributed to Josiah Royce (1855-1916), who, though working with William James at Harvard, soon developed his own line of thinking. Influenced by Hegel and particularly Fichte, he

<sup>1</sup>Alfred North Whitehead made that point perfectly clear when the writer of the present study had the privilege of spending two evenings with him in the summer of 1947, a few months before his death.

arrived at the conclusion that there is an Absolute with a will of its own, which, however, works through the independent individual. His conception of reality is typically idealistic, since for its existence, it has to be 'thought' by a universal mind. The problem of evil is seen in the perspective of the infinite which makes it a necessity in order to protract the finite struggle for the victory of good over evil. For the individual, the conception of loyalty is the way to a good life.<sup>1</sup> All this is obviously very different from what the pragmatists James and Dewey were saying at the same time, and though it was less original and also less influential, it revived the discussion which, after Emerson's days, had not been particularly impressive.

The idealistic outlook was given a further but also rather short-lived impetus by the movement generally referred to as the NEW HUMANISM of the '20s, led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. The latter's point of view is especially interesting because unlike Babbitt, who chiefly confined himself to aesthetic and educational criticism of an anti-romantic character, Paul Elmer More (1864-1937) attempted to give a broader philosophical basis to his attacks on sentimental humanitarianism. He stressed the importance of personal integrity and personality as the essential components of a society which itself is more important than the sum total of the individuals. Lives would occasionally have to be sacrificed to guarantee the existence of society; and even property, as the main pillar of the social system, might become more important than individual life. This may not sound very pleasant to the ears of a melioristic progressive, but it was a natural reaction against the mainly instrumentalist conception of the social system as understood by John Dewey and his followers.

Most disconcerting in More's system was, perhaps, that he found means to revive the Puritan idea of a severe God, of whom man should stand in real awe. More believed that the old religious dread and a downright fear of the Almighty would bind men together more securely than anything else,

<sup>1</sup>Josiah Royce's most important writings bearing on these points are: *The Conception of God*, 1897; *The World and the Individual*, 2 vols, 1900-1901; *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, 1908; *The Problems of Christianity*, 2 vols., 1913.

and that the one control over man's action is his inner check. <sup>1</sup>All this, though it was in direct connection with American (and international) Protestant thought, did not have the large-scale reverberation which one might have expected considering the tradition it sprang from. The comparative oblivion into which More's ideas fell in the '30s has sometimes been attributed to the economic crisis, that is, to the necessity to deal with 'more urgent matters', but it is quite as possible that the difficulty lay in the lack of a closely knitted argument, which prevented More from appealing to the intellectuals with a pragmatic background.

This is what distinguishes him in method from the one theologian and Christian philosopher who in contemporary America appears to have a considerable influence beyond theological circles: REINHOLD NIEBUHR (born 1892). If any modern American philosopher will be able to shake the convictions of the pragmatists, it must be Niebuhr. In his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, published in two volumes in 1941 and 1943, he tries to go straight to the roots of the problem of human existence and argues his points in a way that seldom fails to be impressive. To the general, that is non-theological, reader those parts of the interpretation are the most interesting which deal with the nature of man.

Unlike other theologians, he makes an attempt to discuss the various views of man set forth in the past and the present. He realizes that the modern anthropological conception, with its optimistic treatment of the problem of evil and its rejection of the idea of man as sinful, is of especial importance because it seems "to make the Christian gospel simply irrelevant to modern man".<sup>2</sup> But the very contradiction that exists in the modern conception of man being either essentially a rational creature who should try to free himself of "his involvement in natural impulses", or a natural creature who should be rescued from "the daemonic chaos in which his spiritual life is involved",

<sup>1</sup>Paul Elmer More: *Economic Ideals, Shelburne Essays*, Vol. XI (Houghton Mifflin Co.), New York, 1921, p. 254 and *The New Morality, Shelburne Essays*, Vol. IX, 1915.

<sup>2</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr: *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. in one (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1947 (first published 1941 and 1943), Vol. I, p. 23.

proves "how far modern man is from solving the problem of evil in his life." "Either the rational man or the natural man is conceived as essentially good, and it is only necessary for man either to rise from the chaos of nature to the harmony of mind or to descend from the chaos of spirit to the harmony of nature in order to be saved."<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that both theories cannot be true at the same time. Nor is it possible to accept the idea of progress by relating it to biological process and omitting the daemonic issues to which man may press his unique freedom.

It is not surprising that Niebuhr can only look upon solutions offered by a pragmatist such as John Dewey as "an incredibly naive answer to a much more ultimate and perplexing problem than he realizes."<sup>2</sup> This comment is, by the way, very much what one often hears as a frequent European reaction to American suggestions in the field of social or political relations.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, they have a very salutary effect on the European visitor in America but a rather perplexing one on the same person in his home surroundings.

Of all the modern non-theological explanations of human nature, Niebuhr thinks Martin Heidegger's the ablest one, because it contains the idea that "man is something which reaches beyond itself".<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr's own summary of the Christian view of man is that "It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of 'image of God.' It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. . . . It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>Curiously enough, Niebuhr himself betrays a sprinkling of pragmatism when he argues that 'the naive answers' of John Dewey "could only have arisen in a period of comparative social stability and security and in a nation in which geographic isolation obscured the conflict of nations, and great wealth mitigated the social conflict within a nation." (*op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 111 and p. 112). This would mean that social stability and security, geographic isolation and wealth could, at least, diminish the consciousness and therefore the amount of evil, which would obviously play into the hands of the pragmatists if not Marxists. It would have been interesting to have Niebuhr's opinions on William James's religious pluralism, which is a more difficult nut to crack.

<sup>4</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 162.

unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity, an unwillingness which involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks escape."<sup>1</sup>

The logical consequence of this three-fold characterization of human nature is the doctrine of sin as explained by Niebuhr. Man seeks to solve the problem of the contradiction of finiteness and freedom either by assuming that he can gradually transcend finite limitations, which leads to the sin of pride and will-to-power, or by losing himself in some aspect of the world's vitalities, which leads to the sin of sensuality.<sup>2</sup> The various aspects of the sin of pride in which the temptations of both human freedom and human insecurity appear, are the pride of power, intellectual pride, moral pride, and spiritual pride, as well as its correlate dishonesty, and group pride (the pride of nations), whilst sensuality implies "drunkenness, gluttony, sexual license, love of luxury, or any inordinate devotion to a mutable good".<sup>3</sup>

Whilst the interpretation of the idea of sin keeps necessarily within the bounds of traditional Christian thought, Niebuhr's explanation of human 'anxiety' is for a wider American public a comparatively new conception.

"Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. . . . It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion. . . . That is why Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride."<sup>4</sup>

This interpretation largely derives from Kierkegaard and is one of Niebuhr's main connections with the more recent European development towards certain aspects of existentialism on the one hand and with the Swiss theologians Karl Barth and

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 178 and 179.

<sup>3</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 240.

<sup>4</sup>Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 182 ff.

Emil Brunner on the other.<sup>1</sup> No one will fail to notice a curious analogy with the trends of thought that connected the ideas of Calvin of Geneva with those of the New England Puritans in the Colonial period. It is another piece of evidence of the inner affinity of one part of the New World with the Old.<sup>2</sup>

What lends Niebuhr's ideas a particular significance in the present survey is that they sound very much like an enlightening abstract summary of all the outstanding problems with which modern American writers of the non-pragmatic background concern themselves. There are not only the evident links through the Christian outlook with authors such as T. S. Eliot and Thornton Wilder, but also the less obvious ones, through the problem of the 'daemonic chaos' of man's spiritual life and his 'self-transcendence' with a writer like Thomas Wolfe, or, through the problem of finiteness and freedom and its desperate solutions with authors such as Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald, or Robert Penn Warren. Even the psychological approach to the understanding of man's existential anxiety in writers such as Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner appears to be nearer to this field than to mere empiricism. How much of the dramatic force of Eugene O'Neill's plays is based on the clash of 'vitalities' with some sort of law, remains to be seen. Though in all these writers the problems mentioned do not, of course, appear as aspects or preconditions of 'sin', their connection with the fundamentals of human existence cannot be disputed.

This is particularly significant in view of the fact that EXISTENTIALISM as a philosophy does not appear to have found an adequate protagonist in modern American thought, though its discovery in the years after the Second World War led to lively discussions in various reviews.<sup>3</sup> It would, however, be difficult to say which of the different forms of existentialism

<sup>1</sup>This connection has also been noticed by Adolf Keller in his interesting survey *Amerikanisches Christentum—Heute* (Evangelischer Verlag), Zollikon-Zürich, 1943, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr's conceptions of the Christian doctrines of redemption and historical destiny, which are discussed in the second volume, are less important for the present purpose since T. S. Eliot's position is not here to be considered.

<sup>3</sup>See for example the essays by Marjorie Grene on Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers and Marcel in *Kenyon Review*, Spring 1947 and Summer 1947.

(Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre) appeal most strongly to the American mind. The problems of Time and Being, of Death, Anxiety, and Care, and of the Freedom of human decision, in their particular interrelations of existential interpretation, occur, of course, in the general context of modern writing and it would not be difficult to interpret the work of most modern authors under one or the other aspect of existentialism.

An American writer courageously defined existentialism as "the Search for the Concrete".<sup>1</sup> Whatever objection may be raised against this sort of definition, it indicates at least that, to the American mind, it was less a new departure than a new way of formulating old problems and of establishing a link between metaphysical questions and personal experience.

If, however, one adds the criterion that at the end of the search for the concrete there is death or nothingness as the only certainty the number of books that tentatively could be labelled as existentialist becomes more limited. One might, for instance, include *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) by Nathanael West (1906-40).<sup>2</sup> This is the story of the agony-column writer on a New York paper who, after several desperate attempts to escape his own professional lies, experiences the collapse of what little is left of the concrete in his world. He tries to find peace in his own interpretation of the Christian faith but is killed by a jealous cripple when he tries to act on it. The borderline between reality and nightmare is intentionally defaced and the devastating force at work in the dissolution of all values at all levels, is only equalled by the power and precision with which symbols and imagery are handled.

The search for the concrete, ending in death, is also the theme of the novel *The Seven Who Fled* (1937) by Frederic Prokosch (born 1909). It is a story of seven Europeans of different nationalities who try to escape the dangers of disturbances in revolutionary China and of their ultimate and predominantly tragic destinies. Though outwardly an adventure story, the book presents an interesting instance of the attempt to combine an analysis of European psychology according to

<sup>1</sup>See William Barrett: *What is Existentialism?* Partisan Review Series, No. 2, New York, 1947, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Re-published with an introduction by Alan Ross (The Grey Walls Press), London, 1949. Further novels by Nathanael West include *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939).

different nationalities, temperaments, and surroundings, with the definite idea of the loss of the certainty of a common aim of life in Western civilization, including the values of good and evil. The Englishman undertakes his search for integrity and loneliness at the cost of the power of love and perishes in a snow-storm. The Prussian, in his fanatic belief in discipline, ambition, and leadership, overtakes his physical strength, falls ill and dies after reaching home. The Austrian arrives at an uncertain compromise between West and East. The Frenchman, most acutely aware of the problem that faces Western man, desperately tries to disentangle the jungle of thought, desires, truth and falsehood, and arrives at a kind of ecstasy of the senses in the moment he falls victim to an epidemic disease. One of the two Russians is all instincts and kills the one fundamentally corrupt person among the travellers, whilst the other (not belonging to the seven) is all dialectics and has arrived at the conclusion that mankind at present has only one desire, namely that for annihilation. There remains the Spanish girl, who, through sheer passiveness, turns a prostitute but remains capable of a feeling of happiness in making others happy. Although not all the aspects of the book are equally satisfactory, the creation of an atmosphere of suspense and fright and the description of misery and torture, illness and pain in their peculiar function, appear in a new light after the events of the past years.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst both Nathanael West and Frederic Prokosch are unconscious forerunners of a philosophy that became articulate only after the Second World War in U.S.A., Paul Bowles appears to be definitely connected with the French school of existentialist thought. His novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) is perhaps the most powerful expression of an attitude of abysmal anguish at the horrible idea of sheer nothingness beyond the limits set to human existence. Against a background of nightmares we hear of the final phases in the life of a young American couple travelling on the edge of the Sahara, and gradually going to pieces. The husband, in an increasingly feverish and agonizing search for something absolutely definite in the experience of the outside world, eventually dies of

<sup>1</sup>Other novels by Frederic Prokosch include *The Asiatics* (1935), *Night of the Poor* (1939), and *Storm and Echo* (1948).



typhoid fever whilst the woman, after the death of her husband, joins an Arab conducting caravans, abandons herself to complete dissipation sexually and goes mad. What impresses the unprejudiced reader most is the fact that in spite of the annihilation of all values except existence itself, the book is haunted by a sense of exotic beauty that especially pervades the descriptive passages and lends their imagery a kind of strange finality. Even in the final paragraph which, after the disappearance of the woman, mentions a street-car full of native dock-workers moving towards the Arab quarter of the town, there seems to be the ghost of a hidden illusion to the dull attractiveness of the ordinary life of ordinary people as an antidote to the inferno of existentialist speculation.

### *The Psychological Approach in Fiction*

The psychological approach to the problem of the nature of man is perhaps the one nearest to the empirical way of looking at life. The writers who have adopted this method thus appear to be not very distantly related to determinists such as Dreiser and Farrell. What separates them from the latter is the fact that the description of the outside world is used functionally as a mirror for what goes on in the minds of their characters and not as empirical data to which some sort of adjustment has to be found. The centre of attention lies invariably on the isolated human mind and soul, whatever the surroundings may be. This is also the reason why there is invariably an atmosphere of loneliness about the central characters in such writing and also, as often as not, a kind of clinical touch which may be a result of the application of modern psychopathological theories to the world of fiction.

The beginnings and perhaps also the fulfilment of this sort of approach and attitude with, of course, the exclusion of the clinical element, occurred before the turn of the century in the work of Henry James (1843–1916). In subtlety and refinement his method has never been surpassed by any modern American writer, though many widened its possibilities by applying it to a different class of people and combining it with the analysis of an often cruel or at least unusual reality. A curious aspect of this development is the absence of any apparently direct influence of James's work on contemporary American novelists

with the possible exception of Edith Wharton, Struthers Burt and Glenway Wescott, and that is a guess only. This seems to be in direct contrast to the intensive study of his work in modern criticism, which may be attributed to the predominantly intellectual appeal of his writing.<sup>1</sup> It is also a further element of distinction between James and the later 'psychologists', to whom the emotional sphere of man is of much greater importance than subtle reactions in refined conversation.

This is the case with SHERWOOD ANDERSON (1876-1941), one of the first American writers who, in the inevitable conflict between the vitalities of unrepressed instincts and conventional behaviour, openly sided with the former. He has been referred to as the American D. H. Lawrence, and though this is rather an inaccurate description it points at least to the one problem that the two writers have in common: the will to overcome the sterility and physical frustration resulting from the modern way of mechanized living. If Anderson goes perhaps less deeply into the ultimate sphere of 'the dark gods' and of mystical thought, he also suffers less from the dangers of monotony in subject matter and of conscious reiteration in style. He won recognition with his collection *Winesburg, Ohio: a Group of Tales of Ohio Small-Town Life* (1919), and it was something of an innovation that a series of independent episodes that read like so many short stories were linked together by the common background of the small town, and by a number of recurring characters. If in this way a new kind of balance between diversity of events and unity of purpose was achieved, the effect of the whole was enhanced by the revolutionary courage with which Anderson tackled the problem of repressed sexual desire, "the terrible chasm of fear in America" as Kazin calls it.<sup>2</sup>

There is the story of the middle-aged woman longing for tenderness and just missing it, or of the school teacher who outwardly appears as the confirmed old maid but has to fight

<sup>1</sup>An instructive critical summary of the modern interpretations of Henry James's work is given by Heidi Specker in her article 'The Change of Emphasis in the Criticism of Henry James', *English Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Groningen, Holland, 1948, pp. 33-47.

<sup>2</sup>Alfred Kazin: *On Native Grounds. An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Reynal & Hitchcock), New York, 1942, p. 214.

out whole battles raging within her, or of the young reporter who sneaks out of his office for a brief encounter with a girl he is ashamed to be seen with. There is even the poor pervert who is eternally ashamed of his hands. What makes this subject material still appear original in spite of all the contributions of modern fiction since Faulkner began to write, is the brevity of expression, the straightforward staccato narration and the disciplined use of imagery to create that weird kind of atmosphere peculiar to the slightly deranged state of mind of the people in question.

If Winesburg is a small town with no industry and therefore at least still free from the drawbacks of the machine age, Bidwell, the town in the novel *Poor White* (1920) undergoes all the full process of industrialization and prosperity with all its questionable effects on the population. Here too, however, attention is centred on the mind of the hero who can make no contact with people around him. One of the most positive and optimistic interpretations of the instinct of man is given in *Dark Laughter* (1925), a novel that depicts the life of a man in search of emotional fulfilment, independent of material success. He gives up his job as a journalist, leaves his wife who is a successful writer herself, and becomes a workman in a wagon factory, where his employer's wife falls in love with him. Conscious of their profound mutual understanding in instincts, emotions, and views, they elope together.

There may be a certain heaviness about the whole story produced by the technique of making the characters go back and forth through recollections, but the main thesis of the triumph of natural instincts, symbolized in the unrestrained and happy laughter of the negro population, is carried out to its glorious end. It is perhaps too simple a way of solving the problem of the natural conduct of life at the expense of convention, but as in so many other cases, the very simplicity of the solution increases its appeal.

In this connection, attention may be drawn to the work of Zona Gale (1874-1938), who in several of her novels and especially in *Miss Lulu Brett* (1920) strikes a similar chord. It is the story of a girl in a small town who, instead of becoming an old maid as everybody in her family expects, marries an adven-

turer, finds out that he is already married, returns to her household work, but to the surprise of her relatives is married by another suitor. Again, it is the theme of the conflict between physical desire and the suppressions of conventional small-town life, with the decision in favour of the former, though with a stronger touch of subtle irony and therefore perhaps of less dynamic force than Anderson's treatment of similar themes. But the joy of the heroine of 'having been wanted' could well be taken as one of the signs that the idea of throwing repressions overboard was fast gaining ground.

In this development, the publication of the novel *Porgy* (1925) by DuBose Heyward (born 1885) meant a further step forward, though it can quite as well be considered a contribution to the problem of the influence of a definite social scene on the individual. In fact, the very balance of psychological analysis, regionalist elements and the pragmatic attitude, was possibly the reason for the extraordinary success of this story about negro life in Charleston, South Carolina, and its reception as a play and as an opera.<sup>1</sup> It gives evidence of the possibility of presenting a sociologically low sphere of begging, gambling, prostitution and even murder, without inspiring a feeling of hopelessness or disgust as might be the case in the hands of a determinist or a reformer.

This is partly due to the ideas of solidarity and loyalty by which the actions of the hero, the crippled negro beggar Porgy, and some of his friends, are dictated, partly, however, to the definitely unrepressed and therefore natural conduct of the coloured people, whose own laws and conventions appear to be much more in agreement with their fundamental desires. It is quite possible that the unconscious nostalgia of the sophisticated whites for a freer display of instinctive life has helped to bring about the fame of the story, which is so vastly different from other and grimmer tales about black and white in the South.

If in the '20s Sherwood Anderson, Zona Gale, and DuBose Heyward helped to pave the way for an appreciation of natural

<sup>1</sup>The dramatization was made by the author himself and his wife Dorothy and won the Pulitzer Prize for 1927. The opera, composed by George Gershwin, was first produced in 1935 and has been one of the very few American operas performed in Europe.

vitalities and desires as against the sterility of conventions, WILLIAM FAULKNER (born 1897) has mainly devoted himself to a passionate, if not volcanic interpretation of the complexities, both normal and subnormal, of the human mind. The human mind in the American South one might add, for one of the difficulties in appreciating Faulkner is his unusually involved way of blending different aims and different ways of expressing himself. In fact, one does not always know whether he is making it intentionally difficult for the reader to follow his narrative, or whether he is too much preoccupied with his own unsolved problems to extricate himself from them.

To Faulkner, human nature and the human mind are something terrible, a bottomless pit which holds anything imagination can produce, especially any crime and perversion. But like any other abyss it also exercises a strange fascination over those who look into it. On the other hand, there is his complicated relationship to the South, a sort of love-hate attachment, embracing a powerful tradition and yet kicking against it. For this very reason, it is not easy to choose from Faulkner's work those novels that represent him best. Some of his novels have a definite period touch, such as *Sartoris* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), and the collection *The Unvanquished* (1938), and may thus be linked with the American quest for tradition. But the theme of the decline and fall of old Southern families connected not only with all the probings into human desires, passions and frustrations, but also with the technique of the stream of consciousness, thus changes the period element at times into a tool for something else.<sup>1</sup>

What that is, may perhaps best be seen in his novel *The*

<sup>1</sup>The selection and interesting arrangement of Faulkner's writings given by Malcolm Cowley in *The Portable Faulkner* (The Viking Press), New York, 1946, makes this particularly clear.—See also Maxwell Geismar: *Writers in Crisis*, Boston, 1942, pp. 141–84; Robert Penn Warren: "William Faulkner" in *Forms of Modern Fiction*, ed. by William Van O'Connor, Minneapolis 1948; Lawrence Bowling: 'Faulkner: Technique of "The Sound and the Fury"' in *Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1948; Richard Chase: 'The Stone and the Crucifixion: Faulkner's Light in August' in *Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1948; Claude-Edmonde Magny: 'Faulkner ou l'inversion théologique' in *L'âge du roman américain*, Paris, 1948; Jean-Paul Sartre: 'La Temporalité chez Faulkner' and 'Sartoris' in *Situation I*, Paris, 1947 (an existentialist interpretation).<sup>1</sup> Other books by Faulkner not discussed in the present study include: *Soldiers' Pay*, 1926; *As I Lay Dying*, 1930; *The Wild Palms*, 1939; *The Hamlet*, 1940; *Go Down Moses*, 1942.

*Sound and the Fury* (1929), which deals with the degenerate members of an old Southern family, a father who ruins himself by drink, a mother who is incapable of rearing her children, a daughter who commits incest with her brother and has an illegitimate child that grows up to elope with a showman. One of the sons, a Harvard student, kills himself, the other one is a bully and the third one an idiot. The whole tale, partly indeed 'told by an idiot', signifies nothingness in so far as the evaluation of the soul of man is almost nihilistic. Of all the characters, the idiot alone and possibly his feeble-minded uncle, together with the negro servants, call for something approaching sympathy, which indirectly amounts to a declaration of bankruptcy as regards the qualities of the whites in full possession of their senses. As a straightforward narrative of such events might well be unbearable, Faulkner makes extensive use of the Joycean method, though in this he is definitely less convincing than his Irish master. Thus the first part of the novel is given in the first person singular of the idiot son—but the stream of consciousness fluctuating between the past and the present does not always have the natural flow that would make it entirely plausible. This is also the case in the second part, in which the events are recorded by the guilty brother in a similar technique. And yet, the novel will keep its position in the development of American fiction, because it is one of the first attempts of the present age at a synthesis between the treatment of evil as a symbol and an oblique way of presenting it.

Indeed, the symbolic character of the gruesome events becomes even more apparent in *Sanctuary* (1931), a tale of horror, allegedly written by Faulkner to make money. Whatever this statement may imply, there is no doubt that *Sanctuary* is by no means fundamentally different from the main aspects of Faulkner's work. Again it is a story of rape, murder, prostitution, sexual pathology, and lynching, but this time the structure of the whole is more obviously coherent, the thread of the narrative more easily placeable. What, however, makes the novel far more than a mere shilling shocker is not so much the attempt of one of the characters to stick to a moral principle by undertaking the (unsuccessful) defence of a just but hopeless case, but the fact that the degenerate killer escapes punishment until he is sentenced for a crime he has not committed at all.

The absence of any human compensation or justice in that accumulation of perverse cruelties, is, of course, not without significance. It is evil in its purest form, evil absolute, by which Faulkner is fascinated, and yet it is evil produced and carried forward by human beings. If in the early '30s there was still something unbelievable about *Sanctuary*, the '40s have confirmed Faulkner's assumption that there is no limit to man's criminal capacity.

Faulkner does not appear to have changed in principle since the publication of his early work. If his later work appears slightly milder in certain aspects, it is the introduction of redeeming features that produces this effect. Just as there may be occasionally an acceptable character in *The Sound and the Fury* or even in *Sanctuary*, so there may be acceptable actions and sometimes a burst of grim humour in his later books. Thus the events in *Light in August* (1932), though still sufficiently terrible in the lynching of one of the main characters, are in part at least mitigated by the motive of a girl in search of her lover.

*Pylon* (1935), the story of an airman, a parachutist, a woman and a reporter during the inauguration of an airport, relates the fatal accident of the airman, but also the rudiments of sudden hilarity in the relationship of the airman to the reporter. The connecting link with Faulkner's central theme seems to lie in the motive of hazarding human lives for the sensational and gambling instincts of the crowd, that is, in the predominance of amoral elements over everything else.

This takes us to the most unexpected result of Faulkner's work: its moral effect. In all the incredible horrors and apparently cold-blooded misdeeds narrated by the author, and in spite of the absence of justice, pity and compassion, the reader's attention, involuntarily perhaps, is drawn towards the phenomenon of evil as an essential part of human existence: and the moment one begins to reflect about evil as such, one has entered the field of ethics. This, by the way, is evidently one of the reasons that won him the Nobel Prize. Faulkner is one of the few who expect salvation neither from return of man to nature, nor to a life of the spirit only, because he is aware that the element of evil is an integral part of man's worldly existence. The fact that Faulkner frequently makes his characters incap-

able of understanding fully the meaning of the events in which they are taking part, may be considered a further proof of his idea of the helplessness of man in his attitude towards evil. This is the case of the idiot in *The Sound and the Fury*, of the victimized girl in *Sanctuary*, of the pregnant woman in *Light in August*, of the boy listening to the tale in *A Justice*, to mention only a few, and it justifies to a large extent, though not fully, Faulkner's oblique methods of narration.

Something of a new departure in outlook seems to be noticeable in *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), for the evident victory of justice and decency over prejudice and mass-psychology is not one of mere chance but the result of the undaunted efforts of the hero of the story. This hero is, significantly enough, not a grown-up person but a boy, and as such capable of the incredible effort of standing up against the opinion of a small town and producing the evidence necessary to prevent the lynching of a negro who is suspected of having killed a white man. Though the narrative method is no less oblique than in Faulkner's earlier work, the positive implications are so surprisingly strong that even some of the macabre elements as digging up the same grave twice in one night, are touched by flashes of quaint humour. A definitely optimistic note is sounded also in the analysis of the race relationship, which has a truer ring than in almost any other modern novel, and ranges from the subtle description of a white boy's feeling of obligation towards a negro, to general statements about the South alone being capable and privileged to put the colour question right again. It is not easy to find the connecting link between this melioristic conception and Faulkner's earlier ideas of the nature of man, unless one resorts to the assumption that the bottomless pit may hold purgatory rather than hell.

There is a kind of affinity between Faulkner and CARSON MCCULLERS (born 1918), not only because they are both Southerners and obsessed by the problem of man's incalculable nature, but also through their preference for characters with under-developed or anomalous minds. Carson McCullers, however, is, if anything, stronger in the creation of sustained atmosphere, and seldom confused in her issues. Moreover, there is an element of vision, a quest for some remote values



in her work, which, however great the difference in other respects may be, places her also in the neighbourhood of a writer such as Thomas Wolfe. She leapt to fame long before she even reached her thirties, and whatever doubts one may have about such early celebrity, Carson McCullers has so far not suffered any rebuffs.

Her very first novel with the captivating title *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) was already a study in the multiplicity of the yearnings of the human soul for some indefinable object. A negro doctor, a mute, a man who runs a restaurant and an adolescent girl with a love for music, are under the spell of that strange quest, and though they know each other and even guess a little of the secrets of the others, each of them is essentially alone in his own world of emotions and visions.

This loneliness is even more pronounced in Carson McCullers's second novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), which, at times, strikes one as a curious blend of an account of a few almost clinical cases and a straightforward thriller. A captain at a Southern Army post who contains "within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither" kills a soldier to whom he is drawn by a mixture of love and hate and who, for weeks, has been quietly watching the officer's wife at night. The nature of the story is strongly determined by the writer's technique of giving the events with little reference to, and no explanation of, the profoundly disturbed, if not deranged, minds from which they originate. That one of her characters puts a live kitten into a mail box is a sufficient illustration of this writer's method of indicating a state of mind.

*The Member of the Wedding* (1946) contains similar symbols, but the novel as a whole is more reticent in the structure of the narrative. Here it is the mind of a girl of twelve, whose brother is about to be married, that reflects all the fascinating imaginings of one in search of herself and the unknown. The question "who she was and what she would be in the world, and why she was standing there that minute" is the basis on which the few real events of the story, such as her talks with the negro maidservant, her encounter with a soldier on leave, and her attempt to run away from home, are built up, but again the

charm lies in the originality of the moments of the girl's self-discovery within the course of a few days, the way in which her imagination works, and the absence of any direct commentary on the part of the author.

In this respect, the step from Carson McCullers to KATHERINE ANNE PORTER (born 1894) is not so great as it may appear at first. For here we find a similar reticence in the explanation of the essentials of an event, a similar love of seemingly less important psychological detail, and a similar effect on the reader who has to arrive at his own conclusions about what actually happens in the course of the story. Katherine Anne Porter, however, differs from the writers hitherto discussed through an element of genteel irony peculiar to herself and a preference for motives and moods that are in some hidden correlation to an impending catastrophe. This, perhaps, apart from her extremely flexible style, is her most remarkable quality.<sup>1</sup>

Her output has been extraordinarily small. There are less than two dozen short stories, including a few longer ones that may be considered short novels, such as *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (together with *Noon Wine* and *Old Mortality*) (1939). But her best is probably to be found in the collection *Flowering Judas* (1930), in *Hacienda* (1934),<sup>2</sup> and in the more recent collection *The Leaning Tower* (1945). The events on the surface in these stories are slight enough. In *Flowering Judas* there is little more than the description of the daily life of a young American woman teacher in revolutionary Mexico, who is keeping a number of suitors at distance. *Hacienda* tells the story of a group of movie people preparing a film on Mexican life at a *hacienda*. *The Leaning Tower* deals with the New Year's Eve party of a few people living in a boarding-house in Berlin. What connects the three stories in spite of their totally different scenes, is the fact that in each of them there are two different levels of reality, on one of which there is a powerful intensity of subtle symbolic expression, pointing towards an untold climax. In *Flowering Judas*, the Judas tree itself from which the teacher once plucks a flower for one of her suitors and thus

<sup>1</sup>An excellent summary of Katherine Anne Porter's characteristics is given by Robert Penn Warren in an article with the sub-title 'Irony with a Centre' published in *Kenyon Review*, Winter 1942.

<sup>2</sup>Now published together in a handy volume of the *Modern Library Editions* (No. 88), (Random House), New York.

betrays a bit of her own self, appears in her dream in connection with the death of an imprisoned Mexican friend of hers. In *Hacienda* the casual allusion to the death of a Mexican girl as a result of a pistol shot (fired at her for jealousy by her own brother who is supposed to act this as a scene in the planned film) symbolizes the mystery of hidden violence and desire. In *The Leaning Tower* the plaster cast of the tower of Pisa appears at the end of a drunken debate on 'power policy, as a direct reference to the impending breakdown of moral values in Germany.

The other level of reality is the one of everyday occurrences such as the courting of Braggione in *Flowering Judas*, the domestic worries of Don Genaro with his wife and his mistress in *Hacienda*, and the daily life of the boarders in *The Leaning Tower*. This level is treated with delightful humour and irony and an incredible power of characterization. It is given much more space than the first one, but it receives its full significance only by contrast with the former, and what that is, can best be seen in one of the concluding sentences of *The Leaning Tower*: "an infernal desolation of the spirit, the chill and the knowledge of death".

In this connection, the work of GLENWAY WESCOTT (born 1901) must be mentioned, another novelist who like Katherine Anne Porter is not nearly enough known in Europe, though he has spent a good deal of his life in Southern France. His first novel *The Apple of the Eye* (1924) is still confused in the main issues and rather unsatisfactory, but his second one *The Grandmothers, a Family Portrait* (1927) shows considerable promise in the motive of a young American expatriate in Europe, whose imagination recreates the hard lives of his pioneer forefathers. But it was with *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940) that the author really came into his own. For in this delicately outlined story of a few people casually meeting on a visit to friends they have in common, the emotional reactions of each character towards the others is brought out with amazing subtlety.

It is mainly the various aspects of love, love possessive, domineering, savage, restrained, suppressed, platonic, and physical, that are set in relief, but again, as in the case of Carson McCullers or Katherine Anne Porter, there is little direct

interpretation of the decisive points, but an oblique way of presenting the essentials by means of symbols. Thus, the pilgrim hawk, a pet of one of the couples, that has to be fed and looked after, gradually becomes the centre of attention and the measure of the involved relationships of the various characters.

*Apartment in Athens* (1944) is one of the few successful attempts in fiction to describe the psychology of the population as well as of the conquerors in an occupied country. It is much more direct in method than *The Pilgrim Hawk* and therefore possibly less original, but again the complicated currents of feelings in the everyday contact between the defeated and the victors who will never understand each other, are the author's main concern. Thus, the intellectual Greek in whose house a German officer lives, tries his luck first by 'adjusting himself' to the situation and even offers his sympathy when he hears that the officer has lost his wife and two sons in the war. But the result of all these attempts to understand the other one is that he is sent to prison and executed for making subversive remarks about the dictators. A good deal of all the talking is devoted to the interpretation by the officer of the German outlook. Whether or not the author succeeds in this attempt is less important in the present connection than the fact that once again an especially incomprehensible aspect of a definite type of the human mind is made the subject of a penetrating study.

Glenway Wescott and Katherine Anne Porter are representatives of what, in a phrase, might be called the genteel tradition of psychological fiction. As in the case of the determinist trend amongst novelists, there is of course also the possibility of handling the approach to the human mind in a malicious or satirical way.

The outstanding representative of this kind of approach is Dorothy Parker (born 1893), who, above all in her short stories, has reached an extraordinarily high standard in the drawing of psychological portraits of that order.<sup>1</sup> With superb and devastating skill she particularly attacks that kind of human reaction that runs according to a code of behaviour instead of in its

<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Parker, with an introduction by W. Somerset Maugham (*The Viking Portable Library*), New York, 1945.

natural channels. Her characters always appear in a definite situation which helps to bring them out in the desired relief, such as a newly married couple a few hours after the wedding, a lover about to jilt his girl, two lovers quarrelling and getting reconciled, a New York lady writing her incredibly superficial diary. Such settings make it easier for the author to concentrate on one aspect, so that the tendency towards caricature is nearly always noticeable. Dorothy Parker, however, occasionally also sounds a more serious note, as, for instance, in *Clothe the Naked*—a short story of a blind negro boy who is ragged by his playfellows because he does not realize that he is wearing an evening suit.

### *Between Experience and Vision*

Future criticism may well consider it one of the most significant aspects of the present generation of novelists that so many of its outstanding representatives have tried to overcome a purely pragmatic or deterministic conception of reality by a belief in some value, force, or law, beyond the empirical world. They are those who, as it were, adhere to a position between experience and vision, that is, on the one hand they are profoundly interested in the behaviour of man within his given surroundings, but on the other they are aware of the fact that certain non-rational or non-empirical conceptions, yearnings, or even fears, fundamentally guide such behaviour, without, however, treating these as purely psychological phenomena.)

(According to the relative strength of such conceptions, these writers may be nearer the pragmatic and determinist point of view or else tend towards pure metaphysics.) In this way Steinbeck may be placed near Dreiser and the so-called proletarian writers, except for Steinbeck's distinct belief in the values of loyalty and solidarity that separates him from Dreiser, whereas a writer like Thornton Wilder is primarily a metaphysicist to whom the world of experience serves chiefly as a basis for speculations on the destiny of man. Between these two extremes are the majority of *metempirical* writers as they might be called, including Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, and Henry Miller, however different they may appear in other aspects of their work. /

(It is well to begin with ERNEST HEMINGWAY (born 1898), "the bronze god of the whole contemporary literary experience in America",<sup>1</sup> because it was really he who, starting from a basically disillusioned attitude bordering on nihilism, proceeded by incredibly careful steps to an acceptance of a few values that may well be the creed of a new world, and combined this with a technique of narrative and expression that will long be looked upon as one of the most characteristic features of the literature of the inter-war period.)

It is usual to connect Hemingway with what Gertrude Stein called 'the lost generation' and its literary equivalent, the hard-boiled school of fiction. What Hemingway at the outset had in common with this group was, above all, the personal experience of the First World War with all its physical and psychological consequences, that is, a complete loss of faith in practically any of the traditional values, an awareness of violence and death, and in literary expression a tendency towards bare reporting, be it facts, events, or speech, without any psychological interpretation.

What distinguishes Hemingway from the others is more difficult to ascertain, especially in his earlier phases, but there is no doubt that the characteristics just mentioned are, in his case, tinged with something that points towards a deeper significance. His apparent loss of faith is counterbalanced by a more honest statement of the workings of the basic appetites of man, of the craving for food and drink and sexual satisfaction; his awareness of death and the role of violence in human existence is coupled with a profound feeling for the intensity of life, and the very bareness of his style lends itself to natural but powerful symbols in the creation of moods of the moment. The apparent absence of a message or rather the consciously practised reluctance to say anything that could be interpreted

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Kazin: *On Native Grounds. An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Reynal & Hitchcock), New York, 1942, p. 31. Kazin's chapter on Hemingway is extremely instructive. Other important contributions to the study of Hemingway's work are:—Joseph Warren Beach: *American Fiction 1920-1940*, Chapters IV and V, New York, 1942. Pierre Brodin: *Les écrivains américains de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Paris, 1946. Claude-Edmonde Magny: *L'âge du roman américain*, Paris, 1948. Edmund Wilson in *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1939. Robert Penn Warren in *Horizon*, April 1947. See also Ernest Hemingway: *The Man and his Work*, edited and with an Introduction by John R. M. McCaffery. The World Publishing Company, Cleveland and New York, 1950.

as a belief in a quasi-ideal arises from the natural horror of any sound person who has discovered a mass of sham and cant and insincerity in those who profess to believe in such values but are given the lie by their own deeds.) This is part of the reason why Hemingway has probably had a greater following amongst the post-war generation of the First World War than any other American writer. (One might say that the principle of absolute honesty is the one and only value that emerges from the collapse of all the other values.)

Some of Hemingway's essential qualities are to be found in his very first short story, entitled *Up in Michigan* and written in Paris in 1921, that is, when he was twenty-three years old. A young girl working in a small place is secretly in love with a young blacksmith who hardly seems to notice her. He goes away for a few days' hunting, returns with his friends, gets drunk, takes the girl out for a walk and seduces her. What reappears later in innumerable variations is given here in its elementary motives. (The relationship between man and woman is essentially one of physical nature.) There is no talk of 'love', in fact there is scarcely any talk at all between the two. They are primarily attracted to each other by their appearances and their sexual instincts, one of them (in this case the girl) being hardly aware of her own feelings.)

There is the motive of hunting, an activity embodying physical excitement and therefore providing a more intense feeling of being alive and 'feeling fine'. There is also the motive of being drunk, the state in which man appears to be more himself, because nearer to his unadulterated instincts whether cruel or sentimental. There is further the motive of the separateness of one's actions, the conception that each person fundamentally acts without any regard for the emotional state of his partner: to the young man here, for example, the seducing of the girl is an event by the way, whereas to her it is an almost heart-breaking experience which, however, does not change her attitude towards him. And there is finally the technique of creating atmosphere by a mere hint of a word or gesture—illustrated in this case by the fact that the girl, after her lover has fallen into a drunken sleep, takes off her coat, covers him with it, and "walks home while "a cold mist was coming up through the woods from the bay".

It would be possible to show how great a number of Hemingway's stories are built on similar motives with an occasional change of background and atmosphere. Thus hunting appears as pure pleasure and excitement in *Fathers and Sons*, or as the basis of a story of passion, cowardice and violence in *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. The separateness of human behaviour and feeling appears as the mood of the moment in *A Clean, Well-lighted Place*, as the theme of the relative strength of emotional expression in the different characters in *The Light of the World*, and as utter loneliness in *Old Man at the Bridge*. But it is probably in the stories in which the theme of death appears that the other elements become more expressive as well.

(The phenomenon of death in every imaginable aspect is the theme that has a greater hold over Hemingway than any other, so much so, that it would not be surprising if the adherents of one of the several branches of existentialism laid claim to him. For death, as the only certainty in man's knowledge and beliefs amidst all the shattered illusions of the age after the First World War, appears to Hemingway as the Absolute. True, he never speaks of it as such, and hardly ever discusses it in the abstract except, possibly, in the story *A Natural History of the Dead*, but it is the most powerful source of his inspiration and insensibly moulds all the other elements of his work.)

(There is one short story in which this is done with such skill that it permeates the whole material and gives it a symbolic significance of the first order.) This is the story entitled *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, which may serve as an example of what Hemingway can achieve in the working out of a theme, in structure and in atmosphere.) It is the story of a writer who, dying of an infection from a scratch received while hunting with his wife in the deserts of Africa, recalls certain phases of his life and in a final delirious vision believes he is being flown by a rescuing plane towards the Kilimanjaro. Apart from the fact that death appears here as the main theme, it also accompanies the minor episodes of the reminiscences which appear in five separate groups.

In these episodes death appears first as a more remote and casual element and then gradually moves nearer to the personal sphere of the writer. But it is always violent and cruel death.



He remembers winter in Bulgaria and in Austria, both regions being associated with war experiences in which people get killed. He thinks of Constantinople and the fight and massacre in Anatolia. He recalls Paris and the descendants of the 'Communards' who do not forget by whom their fathers had been shot. He dreams of the ranch where a half-witted boy murdered an old man. And finally, he remembers a ghastly episode of the war when an officer who is cruelly wounded asks to be killed and he gives him all his morphine tablets. Between these reminiscences, there are bits of conversation touching on the more usual aspect of life, but each time death is being mentioned as either coming, or not yet coming. It is mentioned as not yet coming, immediately before those reminiscences that refer to individual deaths and are therefore closest to the dying man. The animals mentioned are associated with death, too; the vultures and the hyena, not to speak of the 'tommies' they are shooting, or the frozen leopard of which more presently. And finally there are the more distant and indirect association of winter and snow, that is, of the dead season in nature.

All this testifies to the extraordinarily well-balanced structure of the story, but it contains only half of the essentials. For the theme of death is set against a background that is associated either with solitary and enigmatic greatness or with the very rush of life. The background of the continent of Africa, its highest summit, and the mountains mentioned in the reminiscences, imply the former, whereas the latter appears in the development of the writer's life. (He is a man with a very rich experience of a wide range of activities: travelling, sports (ski-ing and hunting), and warfare. He has met the rich and the poor, he has loved and destroyed his love, and, above all, he has the wish to create. In fact, this wish is strongest in his mind in the last few hours of his life—all those reminiscences being prospective material for his writing.) All this implies energy and dynamics and finds its climax in his delirious vision of flying towards the Kilimanjaro. But it is also in immediate juxtaposition to death: the urge to create is coupled with a conception of destruction, as the two-fold enigma of life and death.

This, then, is the deeper theme of the story and appears as a symbol in the title and the introductory remark. The Snows of Kilimanjaro: the highest mountain, majestically cold, in the

heart of an immense continent of heat and mysterious life. The frozen carcass of a leopard: a beautiful and savage animal, but found dead at a height where no one can explain what it was seeking there: life outreaching itself. This story explains better than any other why there is something simultaneously attractive and repellent in Hemingway's conception of death and violence. (The notion of an Absolute, even if it is death itself, will always exercise its spell particularly if it is associated with its counterpoint of creative dynamics, of which violence in its turn may be considered the negative or destructive phase.

This negative phase is predominant in Hemingway's first novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) (*Fiesta* in the English edition of 1927), which tells the story of a group of young men and a beautiful woman who calls herself a 'goner'. They do nothing in particular but travel and wander about from France to Spain, gambling, quarrelling, making love, and getting drunk. It is only when they attend a bullfight that they begin to take a new interest in things. And this is a crucial point. The bullfight offers that proximity of dynamic energy and violence, of playful elegance and danger, of excitement and death, which implies the duality of destruction and creation. It is quite possible that Hemingway at that time was not yet fully aware of the positive value of such a duality, but it is a striking feature of the story that in all their spiritual bankruptcy the participants are perfectly conscious of the loss of other values. When the woman in her insatiable desire for men offers herself to a Spanish bullfighter, she refers to herself as a 'bitch' and can put it down as a moral deed that she is capable of giving up her lover. But otherwise the novel is really an illustration to Ecclesiastes's *Vanitas Vanitatum*.

(It is significant that the subject of the bullfight recurs several times in Hemingway's work.) Thus in the story *The Capital of the World*, a young waiter at a restaurant plays at being a matador, and is killed at the game, and in *The Undeclared* the fight of a young matador for victory and fame in the ring is carried to the bitter end. (The most detailed discussion, however, of all the aspects of bullfighting is to be found in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), which may be considered a scholarly treatise on the subject. What lends this book its special attraction is the way in which the problems of form and

ritual, of the essence of cruelty and of creative power, are made to appear as elements of the complex character of the subject, and how they are tackled and elucidated. Again it is the radical honesty of purpose in watching man's psychological reaction towards play and deadly danger that emerges as the one safe guide in the author's analysis.

( In the novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) we get something like an explanation of the general attitude of the author in his earlier phase and of the whole 'lost generation'. The book is generally considered a war novel and one of the most impressive, at that, but the decisive point is that the horrors of warfare, the accumulation of cruelty and death, are set in relief by the narrator's passionate attachment to a nurse and by her own death in childbirth.)

( It would be wrong to speak of disillusionment in this case. It is more than that. The main characters, in contrast to those in *The Sun Also Rises*, have all our sympathy because they try to do their best, according to generally accepted standards of ethics. But they are absolutely defeated in the end, not through their own faults, but through nature herself. It is a strictly deterministic attitude, clearly expressed in a passage like this: "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially".<sup>1</sup> The result is despair of any conception of a possible justice in the machinery of this universe. Just as the military police in the retreat of the army pick out a few officers at random and shoot them, so at the end of the story, after the couple seem to have overcome all dangers and difficulties, the nurse dies in spite of her lover's prayers. From this attitude there is only a small step to the apparent cynicism of *The Sun Also Rises*.)

( The step forward, however, is of much greater consequence. Signs of a change in Hemingway's attitude become noticeable in the middle of the '30s. Not that he is turning away from the themes of his earlier phases, but a new element appears that definitely influences the atmosphere of his writing. This new element is the discovery, or perhaps rather the realization of

<sup>1</sup>*A Farewell to Arms*, chapter XXXIV (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1929.

the significance of constancy and loyalty in human relationship, in short, of the value of solidarity. At first sight this seems to be a small matter, but if one realizes that, together with the principle of honesty towards one's basic appetites, it is the only value in Hemingway's world of vitality and destructiveness, then its significance is beyond dispute. "No matter how a man alone ain't got no . . . bloody chance,"<sup>1</sup> are the last words of the dying hero of the novel *To Have and to Have Not* (1937), and though this statement is made in a negative form, the following sentences, such as "it had taken him all of his life to learn it", and "He had told them, but they had not heard", leave no doubt how strongly the author feels about the point.

It is perhaps surprising that the hero is fatally entangled in criminal activities and does not even hesitate to kill, if necessary, but he is more or less forced into this by circumstances stronger than himself, and his loyalty to his wife and children remains a value untouched by the corruption around him. This sort of loyalty is in itself something almost new in Hemingway's work and it anticipates in a sense the more comprehensive conception of solidarity of which the hero becomes aware in the moment of his agony. No one will fail to recognize the parallel with, say, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, where in the corresponding situation the hero is more acutely conscious of the creative force in him than ever before. It is again death, violent death in a world of intense excitement and cruelty, that sets in proper relief the recognized necessity of co-operation through solidarity. The fact that the other characters do not realize the importance of inarticulate statements, is just another symbol of the essential loneliness in which man finds himself with his beliefs.

Once Hemingway accepted the new value, he characteristically acted on it. His aid with an ambulance on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War is the best-known piece of evidence of that new attitude. Neither a cynic nor a sceptic volunteers for that sort of work, and though the attractions of the purely adventurous aspects of a war with its heightened awareness of being alive may have played a considerable part in Hemingway's decision, it is equally certain that only a person

<sup>1</sup>*To Have and To Have Not* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1937, p. 225.

connecting himself with a cause, that is, a belief in definite values, will risk his life for it.

In a much larger framework this is the very core of the theme of Hemingway's last novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Actually the very title of the novel, taken from a passage in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1626), testifies to the main conception of the book. Whatever happens in this world, it says, is part of one's own concern, and particularly "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind". This is the full synthesis of the idea of solidarity with the idea of death as the only two certainties in man's life, and what happens in this story about the Spanish Civil War is a gigantic symbol of it.

There is an incredible swing in the action and events of four days, during which a young American, volunteering with the Spanish Government troops, carries out an order to blow up a bridge behind the lines of the enemy at the exact time of the beginning of a new offensive. The hero succeeds in this enterprise at the cost of his life. Evidently there is here something absent from the themes of the earlier stories: a new balance between the meaning of the hero's death and the hope attached to his deed. Though the nature of the deed is still of the old order, namely one of destruction, it is born of a belief in the claims of duty and solidarity and done for a definite cause.

Not that this belief appears to be entirely undisputed. On the contrary, a number of elements clearly show how strongly the old scepticism still resists the sparks of the new hope. There is, for instance, the intelligent, complex, but entirely unreliable, at times even homicidal degenerate (Pablo), who helps the hero chiefly in order to settle a private feud with his own people, or there is the colossal stupidity and narrow-mindedness of those in charge of important positions, or the immense distrust of the various factions against each other within one and the same camp. There are the unspeakable horrors committed in a civil war, the feeling of impending disaster and of the futility of much that has to be done, especially with regard to the offensive which can be foreseen as abortive and yet will cost a thousand human lives. And yet, in spite of all that, the balance remains in favour of the new value.

The utter reliability of some of the partisans, both men and women, the fanatic resistance of a group of soldiers fighting to the last man, the courage and patience of a messenger crossing the enemy lines—all these are variations on the theme of solidarity being stronger than circumstance. Even the love of a girl who has undergone tortures at the hands of the enemy and finds a few hours' happiness in the company of the young American, has a touch of the same element, though the attachment is, above all, a frankly physical one.

It is remarkable, too, that together with this new outlook, there is also an increased amount of speculative introspection in the hero. Unlike earlier characters, Robert Jordan not only connects the impressions of the moment with reminiscences of the past but tries to make sense of what is happening to him and of his own decisions. The climax of this is to be found in the description of his last hours, when he is making the final preparations for blowing up the bridge, and after he has received the mortal wound. He wishes for a way to pass on what he has learned. He thinks that he has had a good life and that "the world is a fine place and worth the fighting for".<sup>1</sup> There is a deep significance, however, in the fact that he has to make a conscious effort to believe what he has said to Maria about his being part of her. The balance of the certainty of death and destruction on the one hand, and the values of honesty and solidarity on the other, is kept to the last. But it means a great deal that Hemingway can permit his hero to say: "Each one does what he can. You can do nothing for yourself but perhaps you can do something for another."<sup>2</sup>

At first sight Hemingway's novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950) may almost appear to be a relapse into his earlier disillusioned attitude of, for instance, *A Farewell to Arms*. It is the story of an American colonel of the Second World War who is in love with an Italian girl and dies of a heart attack after shooting duck in the lagoons near Venice. The framework is thus made up of the well-established theme of love and death, of war (in retrospect) and hunting. What distinguishes the book from the earlier ones is a peculiar balance of resignation in the premonition of death, of bravely

<sup>1</sup>*For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Jonathan Cape), London, 1941-7, p. 438.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* P. 438.

contested bitterness about certain war experiences, and of a reluctant gentleness of touch in the description of the love relationship between the aging man and the young girl. In fact this relationship takes the place of the one accepted value and causes the disillusioned colonel to try and make sense of the events of his life. Contrary to the numerous critical objections raised, the novel has not failed to appeal to the post-war reading public as the twentieth-century version of the eternal subject of love and soldiering.

The other outstanding figure of the 'lost generation' or, to be more exact, of the jazz age, FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD (1896-1940), did not have the conviction nor the good fortune to extricate himself from absolute disillusionment. It would be unjust to use this as an argument of criticism against his work, but it will undoubtedly be one of the reasons why later generations will be less interested in his writings as a whole, in spite of the efforts of various outstanding critics in pointing out his qualities and in editing even the smallest fragments of his unpublished work.<sup>1</sup>

Fitzgerald is usually looked upon as the most typical novelist of the first post-war generation, but the mere fact that this point is so frequently stressed is, at the same time, an indication of his limitations. If ever a critic wanted to exemplify the theory that in the long run really great writing cannot be achieved without a definite belief in some values or a definite conception of the world however pessimistic, Fitzgerald's work after *The Great Gatsby* might serve this purpose. Fitzgerald, it is true, has one important quality in common with Hemingway, and that is his absolute honesty towards himself. If one goes through his notebooks,<sup>2</sup> one is surprised at the great number of situations, observations, details of descriptions, coinings, that

<sup>1</sup>See F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Crack-up. With other Uncollected Pieces, Note-Books and Unpublished Letters, etc.*, ed. by Edmund Wilson (New Directions), New York, 1945, and *The Last Tycoon, an Unfinished Novel*, together with *The Great Gatsby and Selected Stories* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1947. A new collection of Fitzgerald's stories is: *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, selected and with an introduction by Malcolm Cowley (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1951. See also Arthur Mizener: *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York, 1951. Budd Schulberg: *The Disenchanted*, New York, 1950.

<sup>2</sup>See *The Crack-up*, pp. 93-241.

he jotted down, and at the almost total absence of any musings on ideas in the philosophical sense of the word or on values.

But there is one important exception. Once he says: "I can even live with a lie . . . but I have made two rules in attempting to be both an intellectual and a man of honor simultaneously—that *I do not tell myself lies that will be of value to myself*, and secondly, *I do not lie to myself*."<sup>1</sup> It would probably take an expert in ethics to decide whether it is possible to live with a lie and yet not lie to oneself, but one thing is certain, that to a man with the sensitiveness of an artist such a conception means an unending and almost superhuman conflict. Actually, Fitzgerald was not strong enough to keep it up. "He never knew his own strength", Glenway Wescott says of him,<sup>2</sup> and the statement is true in more than one sense.

In the fascinating and moving account of his own nervous breakdown entitled *The Crack-up* (1936), Fitzgerald refers to the fact that he "had done very little thinking, save within the problems" of his "craft",<sup>3</sup> and that almost all his doings had been shaped according to the conceptions of other people. On the other hand, when mentioning, as the test of a first-rate intelligence, the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, he gives as an example the capacity "to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise".<sup>4</sup>

Realizations of that sort would be an almost unbearable strain on anyone, but in the case of a person with the creative gift of a Fitzgerald they inevitably had to lead to "a crack-up of all values, a crack-up that he scarcely knew of until long after it occurred".<sup>5</sup> This is how he puts it, and it explains better than anything else why it necessarily happens that, with the exception of the principle of honesty, all the values that appear in his work have a strangely unreal quality; they are either conscious illusions or else disconcertingly conventional ideas. It further explains the strange discrepancy between the brilliant phrasing in detail and the comparative dearth of thought, between the power of atmosphere and the lack of persuasion,

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 329, quoted from *The Moral of Scott Fitzgerald* by Glenway Wescott.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 79.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 80.



in a good deal of his writing—again with the exception of *The Great Gatsby*.

*The Last Tycoon* (posthumously published 1941) is an especially interesting example because, though only a fragment, it shows the kind of way out that Fitzgerald was trying to find from his spiritual predicament. It is the story of a powerful and talented Hollywood producer, Monroe Stahr, who is putting up a losing fight against two encroaching forces: the anonymous controllers of the movie industry and the growing strength of the employees. This fight becomes so embittered that Stahr, fearing for his own life, causes a murder to be committed. He himself is killed in an aeroplane crash. It is significant that the background of the story is Hollywood, that is, that section of human activities where the creation of illusory values is the main concern. It is further characteristic that the hero falls in love with a woman whom he has seen only once, simply because she resembles his dead wife and does not belong to Hollywood proper: this corresponds to an attempt at finding other values on other levels. Moreover, the hero is uncertain of his own attitude towards this woman as well as of his decision to get his enemy out of the way. And finally, there is the unusual device of having the story narrated by the enemy's daughter, who cherishes a hopeless love for the hero—another basic illusion leading to frustration.

Naturally, the whole fragment, powerful as it appears in the shaping of individual scenes, suffers from a lack of cohesion which is a result not only of its being incomplete but of the basic uncertainty of the author. Similar aspects are revealed in his earlier novels, such as *This Side of Paradise* (1920), the story of the illusions and disillusion of a young man in quest of himself (which "hung over an entire youth-movement like a banner"<sup>1</sup>), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934), a novel about the changing fortunes of a psychiatrist, and many of his short stories.

The one novel of Fitzgerald's that probably will outlast all his other writings is *The Great Gatsby* (1935), and the main reason for this is that the author entirely relied on the one great theme that was the experience of his life, namely, the

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 326, quoted from *The Moral of Scott Fitzgerald* by Glenway Wescott.

fatal crash of illusory values and the way in which this affects a group of characters of the first post-war generation.

This theme appears as the motive power not only of the main character but also of the other figures involved in the story, and above all there is no attempt to introduce substitutionary values that could provoke the scepticism of the reader. Thus Gatsby, the hero, builds up his life on the illusion that wealth and position will sufficiently impress the woman of his choice to make her leave her first husband, however crooked the means by which he has become rich. In the case of the woman, it is the illusory value of 'class' that leads to the crash. In the illicit relationship of the woman's husband, it is another man's disillusionment that brings about a fatal car accident, a murder, and a suicide. The bottom falls out of everything, from the sneaking away of the hero's friends after his death down to the discovery that the golf champion has furtively moved a ball into a better position. All this makes for an extraordinary unity of purpose in theme, plot, characterization, and atmosphere, not to speak of the element of suspense which arises from the gradual discovery of the hero's real origin and position, and the imperceptible movements between truth and falsehood.

If in the case of Fitzgerald's characters the envisaged values prove to be illusions, JOHN STEINBECK (born 1902) never hesitates to indicate the way to a vision which is also a belief, however grim and cruel the impediments of the world of facts may appear. He is therefore definitely of another generation than the 'lost' one, small as the actual difference in age may be. There are, however, two aspects that he has in common with his disillusioned contemporaries and they must not be underrated, because they point towards the natural development of thought and style in the inter-war period. These aspects are the belief in the value of solidarity and the skill in creating atmosphere by mere reporting.

What distinguishes him from a writer like Hemingway is that the value of solidarity is just one, though an important one, in his set of standards; secondly, that it is deeply linked with the social and political problem of group life and developed into an element of propaganda; and thirdly, that it shares its significance with any inarticulate yearnings that the poor may

have. Add to this that the style of bare reporting occasionally alternates with elements that appear to be related to the Authorized Version and that there may even be more than a hint of the mood of the *Tall Tale*—and the main reasons for calling Steinbeck versatile are evident.<sup>1</sup>

When he first became generally known through his novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935) it was by no means certain which way he would eventually turn. He could easily have become another Erskine Caldwell, for the way in which the *paisanos* in the town of Monterey in California are depicted in their everyday life of loafing around, drinking wine, making love, and simply trying to exist without having to work, closely resembles Caldwell's portrayal of the poor whites of the South. There is, however, an important difference and that is that Steinbeck makes his *paisanos* more amiable and picturesque and definitely less shiftless, thus helping the regionalist element to take effect. Moreover, there is already the first indication of the motive of group consciousness, which becomes so significant in Steinbeck's later work.

Actually, this is so much in the foreground in the strike novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) that it is not surprising that Steinbeck was looked upon as one of the Proletarian writers who, henceforth, would devote his energy to the propagation of the classless society. But the short novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937), which also appeared as a play, showed that Steinbeck's interests were by no means confined to that aim, but that the purely human longing for peace and quiet could appear as good a value as anything. The dream of two friends to earn enough money to buy a small farm for themselves and to be independent, comes to a tragic end because the stronger of the two accidentally kills a woman and in his turn has to be shot by his own friend to escape the danger of being lynched.

The power of the story lies in the extraordinary balance between the free will of the participants and the force of circumstance, which produces in the reader or spectator that peculiar mixture of awe and compassion that accompanies a true catharsis. Steinbeck's skill in evoking a particular mood of the moment with a general validity is perhaps at its best in this

<sup>1</sup>See J. W. Beach: *American Fiction 1920-1940* (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1942, p. 310.

work. The half-wit's morbid predilection for soft, furry things, which is the cause of his fatal encounter with the villainous woman, thus appears as a symbol for the desire of any inarticulate person for an incomprehensible and mysterious value, a desire, moreover, which if directed into the wrong channels and becoming too violent may only be fulfilled at the cost of a human life. This conception, of course, goes far beyond the mere social implication.

The latter dominates Steinbeck's most successful novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), most successful because it actually led to measures and reforms in the position of the migrant workers of California. The book has been compared with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. It really deals with two economic topics that were of the utmost importance to the United States in the late '30s, namely, the devastating effect of the dust storms on farming in Oklahoma, and the problem of poverty amidst plenty in the situation of the expropriated 'Okies' and other labourers arriving in California.

As both problems have been effectively dealt with since, it will be interesting to notice whether the novel will, nevertheless, keep its position in the estimate of the public. If it does, it will again be due to elements other than the purely economic or political, though the appeal to the sense of justice that is so strong in the book can never be quite separated from the situation depicted. But the values of group consciousness (the Joad family trying to stick together in all misery), of the solidarity of the poorest ("If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones."),<sup>1</sup> of the initiative of the individual in the face of unspeakable hardships—all this is of a generally human interest and independent of a historical situation, to say nothing of Steinbeck's power of creating atmosphere in episodes, of which he had given ample proof in the collection of short stories *The Long Valley* (1938).

To the European reader *The Moon Is Down* (1942) appears as the most powerful piece of propaganda ever written to help a small democratic country to resist totalitarian aggression and occupation. The basic value of solidarity is connected with the traditional ideals of freedom, personal dignity, and local self-

<sup>1</sup>*The Grapes of Wrath* (The Viking Press), New York, 1939–40, p. 513.

government, and there are all the typical aspects of the conflict and the corresponding behaviour of the participants: the mayor who, from a hesitant and slightly bewildered attitude gradually grows into the quietly heroic *macquisard*, his wife who does not quite understand the situation, the miners who, though peaceful citizens, are called up to slow but stubborn resistance, the Quisling merchant ready to betray his country, the young woman whose husband is murdered by the enemy and who in her turn kills an officer who tries to make love to her.

And on the other side there are the various types of the occupation force, such as the experienced major who knows that they will eventually fail in their task but sticks to his duty much against his own conviction, the young fanatics and neurotics who hide their inward fear behind a mask of overbearing cruelty, but gradually learn the lesson that with brutal force alone one cannot defeat an idea. The fact that the whole is done without any exaggerated black and white technique contributes to its verisimilitude. Again, as with *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is difficult to judge the book independently of the actual situation, but there can be no doubt as to the importance of its function during the war.

There seems to be a big step from *The Moon Is Down* to *Cannery Row* (1945), but even without recollecting *Tortilla Flat* the connection is evident, if one realizes that the values of individual freedom and personal dignity together with group consciousness are the basic conceptions in both. The difference is not one of outlook but of events, tone, background, and technique. Actually it is a loosely connected series of sketches of a group of 'bums' living in the sardine cannery district of Monterey, notoriously avoiding regular work, leading an independent life, sleeping in any odd place, doing odd jobs to earn a couple of dollars now and then. They are the absolutely happy-go-lucky people, whose parallel is to be found in a group of twelve girls at the local brothel. It is that kind of *contradistinction* against conventional morals that sets Steinbeck's basic values in specially clear relief. In spite of all their drinking, gambling, quarrelling, stealing, cheating, whoring, and general misdemeanours, the characters are fundamentally sound and kind. There is a strong touch of the humour of the *Tall Tale* about it all, from the barkeeper who reads chapters on Christian

Science to the prostitutes, to the presentation of twenty-one tom-cats as a birthday gift to the universally admired doctor at the Biological Laboratory.

Again *The Pearl* (1947) seems at first sight a new departure, chiefly on account of its style, which at times in its conscious simplicity and illusive symbolism reminds one of the pathos of Oscar Wilde's tales. But even in this alleged Mexican folk-tale about the happiness and misery arising from the finding of an unusually large pearl, the author's sympathy with the poor and his belief in the supremacy of non-material values, particularly in the dignity of the individual, remains evident.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter written in April 1923, THOMAS WOLFE (1900-38) said: "I will go everywhere and see everything, I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotions I am able, and I will write, write, write. . . ."<sup>2</sup> And indeed, from whatever angle one may approach his books, there is fundamentally always the same impression: here is a writer who is struggling with a whole cosmos of experience and ideas and, with superhuman energy, trying to win a gigantic battle singlehanded. And whatever he says, he invariably interprets himself; whatever the title of his books, it is really only one he is writing, and it might well have been called *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or even *Ulysses*.<sup>3</sup> It concerns the endless voyage of the man who sets out to understand his own lonely place in the universe and knows that there is no return home. It is the unique case of a novelist whose epic talent breaks forth in such a torrent that it cannot be mastered by him alone.

With one or two exceptions, all Wolfe's writings were published after extensive cutting by his friend and editor, Maxwell Perkins. In fact, this is one of the major difficulties in any estimate of Thomas Wolfe: the critic who has no means of knowing 'the whole story', that is, the original text of the writer's work, depends (at least as regards its structure) largely

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on Perkins's judgment. In spite of these cuts, the span of Wolfe's writings is tremendous. It is not a question of so many million words or of approximately two thousand five hundred characters appearing in his work, but of the intensity with which the innumerable experiences of the hero are set forth, whether he appears under the name of Eugene Gant or George Webber. All these experiences have just one function, namely, to add something to the shaping of the hero's mind. It is really an encyclopaedic conception that underlies the whole process, and that is the reason why it is difficult to distinguish between major and minor experiences, and even between the relative importance of the values connected with them.

In a way, they are all equally significant, because the hero (that is, the writer) is on a blind quest for the very nature and destiny of man and the foundations of human existence. It is, in Wolfe's own words, "man's search to find a father . . . the image of strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united".<sup>1</sup> This, apart from the metaphor, is almost pure metaphysics, and it is clear that a quest on such a tremendous scale will inevitably include speculations on a number of problems that are far beyond empirical reach.

Two of these appear to be especially urgent to Wolfe. One is the feeling of guilt, the other the awareness of time, and the two are curiously linked together in a statement like this: "I did not know what I had done—I only knew I had ruinously forgotten time, and by so doing had betrayed my brother men."<sup>2</sup>

There are not many cases in modern letters where man's inexplicable, non-rational, apparently groundless anxiety about doing wrong is stated so plainly, and none where the awareness of time as an element in that anxiety is given with such precision. A declared existentialist could not be more definite about it. But there is more in this than the mere interest of a metaphysical statement. Together with Wolfe's encyclopaedic conception it explains the peculiar method of his writing: the atmosphere of restlessness and anguish, the feeling that something terrible may happen at any moment, the ever-present

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Wolfe: *The Story of a Novel* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1936, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 64.

images of movement and speed (especially in train journeys, and in the river symbol), the enigmatic elements in most of the characters presented. This accounts for the power of the description of Eugene's father Oliver Gant in *Look Homeward Angel* (1929), of Starwick and Joel in *Of Time and the River* (1935), of Nebraska Crane and the love affair (imaginary and real) with Esther Jack in *The Web and the Rock* (1937), of the hidden fear of the people in Nazi Germany in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940).

It is remarkable, though, that towards the end of his career as a writer, Wolfe made a conscious effort to leave the mainly metaphysical sphere and come to grips with the reality of his own world. *The Hills Beyond* (1941), in its relatively sober and disciplined manner, is a good example of this change for the empirical. But it is, above all, in the novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) that the new attitude finds its most immediate expression.

The time of the story is set immediately before and after the great crash of 1929, and the whole atmosphere of the boom in George's home-town is already a symbol of the hollowness of the social and economic structure. The party at Esther Jack's with the ridiculous admiration of a crowd of snobs for the performance of a circus of wire dolls, is the parallel phenomenon on the cultural level, while the description of the fire is the first sign of the coming catastrophe—though the spectators, unaware of the death of two elevator men, look upon it as a pleasantly sensational intermezzo. After the actual economic crash follows the period of self-willed isolation and the question-mark about human existence in general. It is followed by the discovery that fame (personified in the successful writer McHarg) is another dubious value, and by the experience of outward order and inward fear in Germany. Only then, that is only after the downfall of practically the whole conventional set of values (wealth, love, social success, fame, order), do we get Wolfe's attempt at a complete revaluation of things in his *Credo*.

It is an amazingly simple and concrete statement. Wolfe thinks, ". . . we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found",<sup>1</sup> or in more detail: ". . . man's life can be, and will

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Wolfe: *You Can't Go Home Again* (Harper & Brothers), New York, 1940, p. 741.

be, better; that man's greatest enemies, in the forms in which they now exist—the forms we see on every hand of fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty, and need—can be conquered and destroyed. But to conquer and destroy them will mean nothing less than the complete revision of the structure of society as we know it".<sup>1</sup>

This is revealing. It might be the creed of any 'progressive' of the pragmatic school, and the only hint that it comes from a different source is the initial position of the words 'fear' and 'hatred'. The line of Wolfe's development reversed that of a Dreiser or a Dos Passos. From a frantic search in the enigmatic world of ultimate questions he had arrived at the idea of reform of the social structure of his own country. We do not know what his books would have been like if time had permitted him to work out his conception of a better America. He died at the age of thirty-eight.<sup>2</sup>

It is significant for the general trend in modern American thought and letters that of the writers who made their appearance during the Second World War, one of the most impressive belongs to the metempirical group. ROBERT PENN WARREN (born 1905) has made himself a name as a novelist, a poet, and a critic, and though his work is perhaps not yet widely known in Europe there is little doubt that it will soon attract considerable attention. The wide range of his subjects, the treatment of problems that touch upon the fundamentals of human existence, the vitality of his characters, the skill with which he creates suspense and atmosphere, and the richness of his language, are characteristics that one does not often find together in a modern writer.

In a way, it is almost surprising that Warren is not a dramatist, for his favourite themes are the radical conflicts between two irreconcilable conceptions of life within one and the same community. Like Hemingway and Steinbeck, he believes in the principle of solidarity as an essential value, but different from them, he stresses its inevitable clash with other elements of human behaviour, above all with those of ambition, love of power, physical desire. He stands for the fundamental

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 738.

<sup>2</sup>See also Pamela Hansford Johnson: *Hungry Gulliver: An English Critical Appraisal of Thomas Wolfe* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York and London, 1948.

honesty that is so vital an issue for the generation between the two wars, but he realizes that the process of arriving at some truth may have devastating effects on the seeker. He is profoundly aware of the need for justice, but has no illusions about its actual status in the social sphere. He is deeply concerned about the question 'What is Man?' and deeply moved by the inexplicable interplay of good and downright evil forces in every human being. That is the reason why one so rarely finds a character or deed in his work that one could clearly set down as either predominantly good or definitely bad, and why in spite of the strong moral implication of his work, one can hardly ever point out its moral.

All this is already evident in his first novel *Night Rider* (1939). It is a story of a secret organization for the protection of the interests of the tobacco growers of Kentucky at the beginning of the century, and of the rise and fall of a fundamentally honest lawyer who, through sheer fanatic loyalty to a cause, takes refuge in illegal activities, breaks up his home, becomes an outcast, commits murder, and finally perishes at the hands of the State Troopers. Interwoven with this is the relationship of the hero to two women and to his friends and enemies, a relationship that is subtle and enigmatic, tender and cruel. There are scenes that read like a thriller, such as the description of the dynamiting of the tobacco warehouses, and others that are presented with an atmosphere of almost lyrical force.

In the novel *At Heaven's Gate* (1943) the predominant characteristics of Warren's aims and methods are still more pronounced. This time it is a girl who, in her reckless search for what is absolutely genuine and real in a man and a lover, turns from one experience to another only to end in utter disillusion. Her first lover proves to be weak when confronted with the problem of honesty in business; the second turns out to be an extremely intelligent but degenerate swindler; the last is the most real, but also the most brutally frank of the three and refuses to marry her when she becomes pregnant. She is finally killed by the degenerate.

Parallel to this runs the story of her relationship with her father, who is involved in corrupt business practices, and there are also the statements of a poor farmer who, in his disastrous

experiences, finds consolation in religion. Again the interplay of values and characters as it is handled by the author, does not permit the emerging of clearly positive or negative elements, with the possible exception of the status of the poor in spirit and the pure in heart, and of the right to follow the quest for the essence of life.

The awareness of the intense and inexplicable complexity of life and value reaches its climax in the novel *All the King's Men* (1946). Roughly, this is a story of the rise of a politician in a Southern State to practically dictatorial powers, and his end through murder at the hands of an 'idealist'. But the whole process appears in an almost incredible number of shades of meaning, partly on account of the variety of characters and happenings that are directly or indirectly connected with the fate of the boss, and partly because it is told by a friend whose own vision and scale of values undergoes a decisive change in the course of events. From his original belief "that nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch"<sup>1</sup>—that is, from absolute moral scepticism—he arrives at the conclusion that history may be blind but man is not, and lastly (though these are not his own words) that "the creation of evil is . . . the index of God's glory and His power",<sup>2</sup> and that "a man's virtue may be but the defect of his desire, as his crime may be but a function of his virtue".<sup>3</sup> This change is mainly brought about by the narrator's discovery that by an act of blackmail, and without foreseeing the result, he has driven his own father to suicide.

The whole has been called a story of rebirth,<sup>4</sup> and actually the problem of arriving at an ever deeper insight into man's infinitely complex nature and of achieving a continual revaluation of one's experiences, is never far from the author's mind. Whether there is an inward connection between Thomas Wolfe's and Robert Penn Warren's search for the 'real father' on the one hand and the general quest of the modern American

<sup>1</sup>*All the King's Men* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1946, p. 461.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 462.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 463. Crime as a function of virtue appears also as the theme of Warren's novel *World Enough and Time*, 1950.

<sup>4</sup>See the interesting article "The Narrator's Mind as Symbol: An Analysis of *All the King's Men*" by Norton R. Girault, in *Accent, a Quarterly of New Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Summer 1947, pp. 220-234.

public for tradition on the other, may at first—appear as a rather far-fetched question, but it is certainly worth putting it.<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to arrive at an unbiased estimate, however brief, of HENRY MILLER (born 1891), whose work began to attract the attention of European readers soon after the Second World War. His earlier books had a *succès de scandale*<sup>2</sup> which was apt to divert criticism from what he really had to say, and even now the intentional formlessness of his writing will frighten off a good many readers whose opinions otherwise may not be so different from Miller's. Like so many others of his generation he starts from a point of complete disillusionment about modern civilization, a disillusionment which in his case turns into fanatic hatred. Evidence of this will be found in *The Cosmological Eye* (1939-45), especially in the short story 'The Tailor Shop', which contains the impressions of a tailor's son in New York and ends in a cry of despair about the utter futility of the activities of modern man.

On a larger scale, the same theme is treated in *The Air-conditioned Nightmare* (1945), by which expression the author means his own country. But the mere fact that he so furiously attacks present-day civilization proves that he has other and more comprehensive values in mind, though they may at first appear as "shapes of a deep confusion".<sup>3</sup> The most important of these values is a belief in the fullness and richness of a natural life, as against the sterility of a mechanized age. This accounts for his admiration for D. H. Lawrence, for the emphasis which is laid on sexual hunger, for the image of the

<sup>1</sup>The relationship between child and parents, together with the attraction of the enigmatic, is also the theme of Warren's short story *Blackberry Winter*, originally published in 1946 and republished in the collection of short stories *The Circus in the Attic*, 1948. In Warren's poetry the mystery of man's existence often appears connected with the idea of time as a meta-physical conception. See *Selected Poems*, 1944; *Thirty-Six Poems*, 1936; and *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, 1942. See also Eric Bentley: 'The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels', in *Forms of Modern Fiction*, edited by William Van O'Connor, Minneapolis, 1948, pp. 269-286.

<sup>2</sup>Miller's earlier books, such as *Tropic of Cancer*, 1934; *Max and the White Phagocytes*, 1936; and *Tropic of Capricorn*, 1938, were published by Obelisk Press, Paris. They are banned in the United Kingdom and the U.S.A.

<sup>3</sup>This is the formulation of Herbert J. Muller in an instructive essay on Henry Miller in *Kenyon Review*, Summer 1940, p. 312 ff.

world as an enormous womb<sup>1</sup> where everything is continually born and re-born, for the almost savage pleasure he takes in the comedy of certain situations, and even for the eloquence with which he relates travelling experiences such as those in Greece, in *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941). A further result of this attitude is his admiration for persons who dare live an individual and independent life; to such people he devotes a volume of essays *Remember to Remember* (1947).

The most interesting aspect, however, of that revolt against the present situation, is his occasional flight into a world of pure fantasy, though that phase seems to occur less frequently in his later writings. A very good instance of this is to be found in the sketch 'Scenario'<sup>2</sup>, which is a kind of surrealist movie script, symbolizing visions of ecstasy and nightmares of sadistic lust, whilst 'Into the Night Life'<sup>3</sup> gives the fleeting impressions of the ideas and sensations in the state between sleeping and waking. It is characteristic that the torrent of Miller's ideas and imagery appears often at its best in those pieces which are only remotely connected with the world of actual experience. In this respect Miller's work forms a link with those writers who predominantly believe in the realm of imagination as an ultimate value.

<sup>1</sup>See the essay 'The Enormous Womb' in *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New Directions),<sup>4</sup> Norfolk, Connecticut, 1941.

<sup>2</sup>'Scenario' in *The Cosmological Eye* (Editions Poetry), London, 1945, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 233.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE REALM OF IMAGINATION

#### *Aesthetics*

THERE have always been thinkers, artists, poets, to whom the reality of their surroundings or the struggle for superimposed values, especially of the moral order, becomes so unbearable that they turn away from it altogether. The possibilities that lie before them are either speculative scepticism or the step into a world of such self-willed imagination that it appears as more or less fantastic to the onlooker. Such attitudes are also noticeable in modern American thought and letters, though they are by no means very frequent. Experience and vision appear to have too strong a grip on the contemporary mind to permit much space for mere fantasy. Moreover, according to the very different modes in which this outlook may find expression, certain distinctions will emerge right from the beginning.

There is the possibility of abstract speculation that considers reality as unknowable, and imagination as an instrument to construct a world of its own. This is Santayana's solution. There is further the way of picking on certain carefully chosen aspects of one's personal experience and of dissolving them in an imaginary world of dreams and symbols. This is Cabell's and, more recently, Eudora Welty's way. If the emphasis is shifted to playful experimenting the result may be a style such as Gertrude Stein's. And finally, there is the sphere of the poets who, though often profoundly involved in the struggle to comprehend the world around them, are equally bound up with the realm of pure imagination. What all these ways and their representatives have in common is a basic sense of beauty which, however different it may appear in each case, is for them the one certain value they adhere to.

This takes us immediately to GEORGE SANTAYANA (born 1863). It is significant that the philosopher who gave the most



plausible theory of scepticism and of the power of imagination, also wrote poems, plays, and a novel, thus testifying to the deliverance through creative work, and yet never felt quite at home in America.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1896 he maintained: "Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing".<sup>2</sup> With Spinoza he held that we desire nothing because it is good, but it is good only because we desire it, therefore "all values are in one sense aesthetic",<sup>3</sup> and "to feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to feel it".<sup>4</sup> Thus, artists who produce this feeling are, in his opinion, greater than the discoverers of historical truth.

This conception of the 'Sense of Beauty', which as a phrase also served for the title of his first book on aesthetics, largely remained the basis for all his later speculations, including the five volumes of *The Life of Reason* (1905-6), *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923), and the four volumes of *The Realms of Being* (1927-40). He was always convinced that there was no separate thing called aesthetics and no distinction between moral and aesthetic values, but the problem to which he devoted most attention, as the above-mentioned titles show, was the connection of this sense of beauty with ontology and the theory of knowledge.

Santayana is one of the rare examples of a philosopher who, though starting from aesthetics, is both a confirmed materialist and a sceptic. Matter, according to him, is the only thing that really exists and the only basis of whatever we do, feel, or think, but, though ever present, it remains unknowable. What you may try to arrive at is harmony in the spirit, but the whole magnificent structure of science, philosophy, religion, is entirely a creation of our imagination. "Sciences are dreams

<sup>1</sup>Santayana was born in Madrid, brought up in Boston, and became professor of philosophy at Harvard University. In 1912, however, he gave up his academic work and went to live in Oxford, Paris and Rome. In continental Europe he became known to a wider public through his novel *The Last Puritan*, 1935. It is a story of a rich New Englander who 'thought it his clear duty to give Puritanism up, but couldn't'. The attitude of the author is one of concealed hedonism, which lends the book a peculiar and highly refined quality of irony. A collected edition of Santayana's works, the so-called *Triton Edition* in 14 volumes, was published 1936-7.

<sup>2</sup>Santayana: *The Sense of Beauty* (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, 1896, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 11.

abstracted";<sup>1</sup> Nature and History are mere notions. They may exist as images and thus be looked upon as essences by which we try to comprehend the world around us, but they have no reality in the sense in which the word is usually used. There is, however, a "sense of existence, of action, of ambushed reality everywhere about us" which appears "in action, in expectation, in fear, hope, or want". This is what Santayana calls 'animal faith'<sup>2</sup> and it appears very much as a bridge between the sphere of imagination and the unknowable.<sup>3</sup>

All this could easily serve as a theoretical basis for all imaginative and a good deal of metempirical writing, where the 'sense of ambushed reality'—an extremely impressive phrase—is especially evident. In practice, this did not happen. Contrary to, say, the theory of imagism, which was widely discussed by, and exercised considerable direct influence on, a whole generation of poets, Santayana's theories found little or no immediate or conscious application amongst those who might easily have been his followers. Apart from the fact that in America the practical example has always been of greater effect than mere theory, Santayana's theories were produced in an age that was more inclined towards the analysis of a social setting and the behaviour and destiny of man than to ontological problems. And yet there is, apart from the poets, a small group of writers of fiction who definitely, though not in each case consciously, find that deliverance in the world of imagination which is entirely in keeping with Santayana's ideas.

### *Fantasy*

JAMES BRANCH CABELL (born 1879) is the first to be considered in this connection. His work comprises novels and short stories, literary and general criticism, verse, satire, comedy, and even genealogical writing, but probably he will above all be remembered for the two novels *Jurgen* (1919) and *Figures of Earth* (1921). Cabell's fiction is 'fiction' in the original sense of the word. He creates an entirely fantastic world of his own, that seems, at first sight, to have no connection whatever with the

<sup>1</sup>Santayana: 'Brief History of my Opinions' in *Contemporary American Philosophy. Personal Statements*, Vol. II (Macmillan), New York, 1930, p. 255.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 255.

<sup>3</sup>See also Paul A. Schilpp: *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, Chicago, 1940.

world we live in. 'Poictesme', a legendary country of the late Middle Ages, is the scene of events in which characters and elements from the mythologies and fairy tales of the whole world, classical and medieval, exotic and romantic, appear to play their parts in the development of stories which have about them a strong touch of the allegorical and satirical. The amount of secondary motives and minor incident is sometimes so great that it occasionally hides the main argument. And yet, the main purpose of the stories is plain if one sticks to the bare outline.

Jurgen, for instance, is a pawnbroker whose wife disappears and who, in reluctant search for her, meets the beloved of his youth only to discover that he does not desire her any more. Instead, he has adventures with Guinevere, the Lady of the Lake, Helen of Troy, a hamadryad and a vampire, until he meets Koshchei ("who made things as they are"), refuses to accept any of the beauties offered to him, and is united with his wife. *Figures of Earth*, on the other hand, is the story of Manuel, the swineherd, who makes figures of clay which he models and remodels: "until the figure is to my thinking and my desire". Manuel too, sets out on a quest of adventures, in the course of which he first discovers that love, wisdom and piety are not the ultimate things he desires. Like Jurgen, he longs for the memory of the beloved of his youth and actually regains her from the dead by agreeing to live with the figure of 'Misery'. She proves to be a sound and sane person at Manuel's side, and he, as the redeemer of Poictesme, lives in his palace until death calls him and washes away all his memories except the vision of young Manuel modelling and remodelling his figures of clay.

It is plain that both these stories—and Cabell's whole work, for that matter—are based on the belief that man's dreams and imagination, and his creative urge, are more important than anything else. There is the further distinction that the illusion of love is more significant than actual fulfilment, and that we only become sufficiently aware of the value of imagination and its creative power, if we consciously put it in juxtaposition to everyday life. Some, like Jurgen, after an occasional escape into the world of dreams, may become reconciled to everyday life, others, like Manuel, will never be satisfied with what they create

in their imagination and will restlessly go on to ever new adventures of the mind, even at the cost of losing other values.

It is an essentially aesthetic outlook on life, though distinct from a purely 'art for art's sake' philosophy through a belief in creative activity.<sup>1</sup> An inevitable result of this outlook is an attitude of satirical humour towards everyday values—particularly of conventional morals—and a certain amount of irony towards the creations of one's imagination. This accounts for the curious mixture of archaic and modern elements in Cabell's writings, such as the use of Freudian symbols side by side with traditional mythological motives, or of the combination of rare and obsolete expressions with modern slang. There may be something highly artificial about Cabell's way of writing, which a generation brought up on the terseness of Hemingway and the hard-boiled school of fiction will find difficult to accept. But there is no doubt that his attack on philistine views and his emphasis on the fantastic did much to make his contemporaries aware of the pleasures of pure imagination.<sup>2</sup>

GERTRUDE STEIN (1874–1946) and her influence as a "catalyst in the physico-chemical chaos"<sup>3</sup> of the lost generation, appears to be of a quality very different from that of Cabell. In style, the two are worlds apart from each other. And yet they have a kind of playfulness in common, which arises from an attitude of keeping at a distance from the world of objects and of looking at it as material to toy with in their imagination. They are both convinced that the art of writing exists for its own sake, and in both there is probably a higher proportion of pure intellect at work than in most contemporary writers of fiction. This is, in fact, so pronounced in Gertrude Stein's case that it is difficult to establish any other basic value in her work.

Her famous statement that the business of art is to live in

<sup>1</sup>See the instructive analysis given by E. Th. Selig in his essay *Die Weltanschauung James Branch Cabells*. Englische Studien, Vol. 72, 1937–8, pp. 355–399.

<sup>2</sup>Other books by James Branch Cabell include the essays *Straws and Prayer Books*, *Dizain des Diversions*, 1924; *The Silver Stallion*, 1926. A collected edition of 18 volumes, the so-called *Storisende Edition* appeared 1927–30. See also Carl Van Doren: *James Branch Cabell*, New York, 1925 and 1932.

<sup>3</sup>See Fred B. Millet: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, p. 66.

"the complete actual present" really excludes a long-range evaluation of things in general. What can be achieved in this way is the careful reconstruction of the writer's imaginative reaction towards the set-up of a moment. This is the reason why almost all critical opinion of Gertrude Stein's work has been chiefly concerned with her style, her theory of writing, and, to a lesser extent, with what might be called her 'observations'. At bottom, her principles sound surprisingly easy. A technique of repeating certain words, phrases and sentences in order to emphasize the vision of the moment, preferring verbs to nouns in prose, and abandoning a good deal of punctuation—this is the core of her theory. And a considerable part of her experimental writing appears merely to consist of practical exercises in application of the theory, and will hardly be taken very seriously except by her most ardent admirers. Even *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), though full of fascinating recollections of her relations with a host of internationally known artists and writers in Paris, including Matisse, Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernest Hemingway, and a great many others, occasionally tires the reader through the very consistency of its method and humour. Even simplicity of expression can be too brilliant.

There is perhaps only one book of hers that really will be read for its own sake. *Three Lives*, published as early as 1909, already contains all the essential characteristics of Gertrude Stein's work, but without its later excrescences and mannerisms. This is in itself important, but would not, of course, suffice to win the book the general esteem it has received. The decisive point is that here a specific method of writing was applied to a subject matter which, by its very nature, could hardly be better dealt with in any other way. It is doubtful whether the author was fully aware of this.

The stories of the two servant girls 'the good Anna' and 'the gentle Lorraine', and of the mulatto girl 'Melanctha' in *Three Lives* are instances of character sketches that would inevitably tend towards a combination of the inarticulate and the subtle. The emotional experience of the class of people to which these characters belong is, of course, as complex as any human being's, but it is certainly less articulate than that of a fully educated person. The difficulty of giving an adequate rendering

of the consciousness and the mood of such people is met by Gertrude Stein's method as hardly ever before. Here the extreme plainness of the vocabulary and the use of repetition as means to emphasize the living moment appear entirely to the point. At the same time the objectivity of the artist is so absolute that one cannot decide whether she takes sides with any of the values that her heroines believe in. Though this remoteness of intention, together with the mannerism of her later work, may well account for a decrease of Gertrude Stein's fame as a writer, her influence on the technique of the whole 'lost generation' can hardly be overrated. After all, it was she who discovered the secret of subtlety through utmost simplicity in the smaller units of speech.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst the younger generation, there are very few novelists indeed whose work is plainly based on the conception of the absolute autonomy of imagination. In fact, EUDORA WELTY, a Southern writer, appears to be the only one with an undisputed talent for this kind of writing, and she is also the most promising one, because, unlike James Branch Cabell's and Gertrude Stein's, her fantasies appear entirely natural and her style practically without mannerism. The reason for this achievement lies undoubtedly in the fact that Eudora Welty possesses the faculty of moving imperceptibly from the world of fantasy into everyday life and back. In fact, she started by writing stories in which background, action and character appear to have a perfectly realistic basis. But even in the early collection *A Curtain of Green* (1941) the reality of her setting is only a means to create the specific mood or atmosphere which, as a rule, emerges from the mind of one of the persons—as, for instance, in the title story, in 'Clytie', 'The Hitch-hikers', and 'Death of a Travelling Salesman'.

There is a peculiar sense of loneliness about these characters and settings<sup>2</sup> which becomes especially accentuated when the motive of approaching death is connected with them. On the

<sup>1</sup>Other books by Gertrude Stein include: *The Making of Americans*, 1925; *How to Write*, 1931; *The Geographical History of America*, 1936; *Wars I Have Seen*, 1945; *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, edited with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten, New York, 1946.

<sup>2</sup>This aspect of her work has been especially emphasized by Robert Penn Warren in his instructive essay: 'The Love and Separateness in Miss Welty', *Kenyon Review*, Spring 1944, p. 247 ff.

other hand, Eudora Welty does not refrain from making use of grotesque elements if they serve her aim in producing the isolated emotional world of one particular individual. This is the case in *Lily Daw and the Three Ladies*, where a 'feeble-minded' girl who is about to be sent to an asylum is suddenly discovered to have a lover who wishes to marry her. If Eudora Welty had produced nothing else than this collection of short stories, she would have to be placed somewhere between Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers, that is, in the region of those writers who are predominantly interested in the analysis of the human mind.

*The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), however, opens up new aspects. It is a bold attempt at a modern fairy-tale, takes over grotesque elements, unites them with regional ones, and gives free rein to pure fantasy. It is chiefly the story of the girl Rosamond, who is victimized by Jamie Lockhard the robber, falls in love with him, marries him, and loses him again because she wants to know about his origin, but after a long search finds herself reunited with him, whereupon he turns out to be a rich merchant. There is a wealth of minor events, such as the doings of an evil stepmother who is eventually killed by Red Indians, of another robber, who keeps the head of his executed brother in a chest where it periodically says 'Let me out', and of another boy, who tries to blackmail Rosamond into yielding to him.

In all this, one may be tempted to look for allegory—but the fabulous groundwork is there for its own sake, as a remark by the author about the heroine plainly shows: "As for Rosamond, she did not mean to tell anything but the truth, but when she opened her mouth in answer to a question, the lies would simply fall out like diamonds and pearls."<sup>1</sup> This is really the key to a good deal of Eudora Welty's work, and it clearly means that to her the world of the fabulous is not only reality, but also a supreme value. Whether Eudora Welty has been fully able to throw the fantastic into shape is, of course, another question. In spite of the great charm that her novel exercises, there appears a certain lack of discipline in the structure of the whole, which points towards the difficult problem of the interrelation of

<sup>1</sup>Eudora Welty: *The Robber Bridegroom* (Doubleday, Doran & Co. New York, 1942, p. 39.

form and fantasy, and raises the question whether the merely capricious can be controlled by unity of form.

This has been achieved by the author in her collection of short stories *The Wide Net* (1943). The solution lies in that imperceptible transition from the world of facts to that of fantasy, and the sudden emphasis on the latter in the way of a climax. This is especially the case with the title story in which the action centres upon a young man who, after a quarrel with his wife, receives from her a note that she will drown herself. Together with his friends he drags the river with 'the wide net', with no results except catching fish, and a vision of the king of snakes, whereupon he returns home and finds his wife safe.

The quality of the story lies chiefly in the extraordinary skill with which an atmosphere of melancholy is gradually changed into one of hilarity. Though none of the men fundamentally believe in the suicide of the young woman, they gravely set about their search until, under the stimulus of their miraculous draughts of catfish, they forget about their original purpose and enjoy themselves thoroughly. Thus the vision of the king of snakes, though a surprise, appears as a perfectly natural event, and symbolizes the height of exultation in which the river-dragging party find themselves. It is a new way of making use of the fabulous for setting an atmosphere in relief.

A similar method is to be found in the story 'Asphodel', in which three old spinsters recall the fortunes of a proud woman who whipped her unfaithful husband from her house, began to dominate the whole village and eventually died of a stroke. At the height of their recollections they have the vision of an old naked man and a herd of goats, and fly in panic back to their village. Again the power of the narrative lies in the unexplained and inexplicable connection of a real event of the past with an imaginary experience of the present. There is a wide range of subjects in these stories, but however different the action, the characters, and the settings, the essential element is invariably the merging of a real event and an imaginary experience—be it simply waking and dreaming, as in 'First Love' and 'The Winds', the shock of recognition in a dangerous situation, as in 'A Still Moment', or desire and imaginary murder, as in 'The Purple Hat'.

There is again a change of method in Eudora Welty's novel



*Delta Wedding* (1945-6), which describes, through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta, the events of ten days before the wedding of one of its inhabitants. The fantastic element has disappeared, to make room for a subtle, psychological approach, worthy of a Katherine Mansfield or Virginia Woolf. There is, however, less originality in this than in her previous work. Seen in the larger framework of modern American fiction, the need for a successful handling of the fantastic is actually greater than a further refinement of psychological narrative,<sup>1</sup> and fortunately Eudora Welty has not really forsaken it, as her chronicle *The Golden Apples* (1949) clearly shows. Though the events and characters in this book centre upon the reality of an American small town in the south, they are seen through the imaginative minds of different adolescent persons and thus appear nearer a world of powerful, though oblique, vision than mere psychological interpretation.

### Poetry

A study such as the present one, in which the basic attitudes of the different writers are made the main concern, will necessarily have to be rather brief in a survey of modern poetry. American poetry is considered here as an expression of various fundamental attitudes and beliefs, and not in its formal aspects, however important they may be for an evaluation in the usual connections. An essential element is thus omitted. But as it has been dealt with in various other publications<sup>2</sup> the omission is possibly of smaller consequence than may appear at first sight.

<sup>1</sup>See also Eunice Glenn: 'Fantasy in the Fiction of Eudora Welty' in *A Southern Vanguard. The John Peale Bishop Memorial Volume*, edited by Allen Tate (Prentice-Hall, Inc.), New York, 1947, p. 78 ff.

<sup>2</sup>See Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska: *A History of American Poetry 1900-1940* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1946. Louis Untermeyer: *Modern American Poetry. A Critical Anthology* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1942 (with instructive introductory chapters). See also the corresponding chapters in Fred B. Millett: *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1940, and in the 2nd volume of *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert E. Spiller, etc. (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1948, as well as the essay by F. O. Matthiessen: 'American Poetry 1920-1940' in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Winter 1947, and *Modern American Poetry* edited by B. Rajan (Focus Five), London, 1950, with instructive essays by various hands. John Ciardi (Editor): *Mid-Century American Poets*, New York, 1951.

Another problem is the grouping of the poets according to their respective outlooks. It will be seen that the same attitudes discernible amongst thinkers and novelists are also to be found amongst poets. From this point of view it would have been possible to consider the individual poets side by side with their fellow writers in fiction. A poet like Sandburg would then have appeared in the chapter 'The Power of Reality' (the social scene and the individual), Edgar Lee Masters and E. A. Robinson in 'The Fate of Man' (the psychological approach), Robert Frost in 'Between Experience and Vision', etc., etc. But apart from the fact that in this way the links between the various poets would have been severed, it would also have effaced a vital distinction between the novelist and the poet, namely, the fact that a communication in prose is conceptual and informative and, therefore, has another kind of validity than the more imaginative and contemplative knowledge that may be derived from poetry. In other words, a statement made in poetry is, as a rule, so much more profoundly linked with the realm of imagination than one in prose, that it is always to be considered under that aspect, even if the attitude behind it can be perfectly well defined in terms of prose concepts. It is absolutely legitimate to speak, for instance, of Robert Frost as a metempirical poet, but his metempirical statements are so strongly modified by his imagination that they are entirely distinct from those of the corresponding novelists. This should explain why all the poets, despite their totally different attitudes, are being taken together here as subject to the realm of imagination.

It is generally agreed that the turning point in the development of American poetry is the year 1912, because it was in that year that the tendencies which since then have powerfully affected the character of poetic writing, first became evident. The vehicle for this new movement was, above all, a new periodical which, mainly through the efforts of Harriet Monroe (1860-1936), was published in Chicago under the title *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. At the same time an anthology edited by Mitchell Kennerley entitled *The Lyric Year*, containing one hundred poems, helped to make a wider public aware of the arrival of new forces in that field.

In the first few years of its existence, *Poetry* sponsored such

talents as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg, several of whom practically made their first appearance there, and it also opened its columns to the imagist movement that had sprung to life in London, thus establishing an important link with the development of modern English poetry. In fact, this is one of the remarkable aspects of twentieth-century American literature that, unlike the novel and the drama which developed in almost absolute independence from England, poetry grew along the lines of a constant interchange of ideas and especially of forms, between America and England.

The awareness of the power of reality and its social implications have found especially eloquent expression in the poetry of CARL SANDBURG (born 1878). Though there appears to be a close link between him and the tradition of Walt Whitman in thought and forms, the peculiar appeal of his verse originates from a kind of tension between his love of man in the huge collectivity of the American continent, and his sense of individual fates and surroundings, coupled with a unique and very personal feeling for the growth of his country. In this respect there is a greater unity of attitude in Sandburg's work than in most of the modern poets, in spite of the diversity of his writings. He may not have written a great many really outstanding poems, but neither are there any that one would not have liked to see printed.

Some of his earliest have remained the best known, especially 'Chicago' of the *Chicago Poems* (1915),<sup>1</sup> which has become an anthology piece and justly so, for it embraces a vision of the essence of that 'city of the big shoulders' finer than anything yet achieved for any other city of the United States except, possibly, for New York, in the novels of Dos Passos, with whom, in fact, Sandburg has much in common. There is even more of the affirmative in Sandburg's acceptance of that brutal but vigorous reality and especially of the collective character of social units, whatever their defects otherwise.

<sup>1</sup>'Chicago Poems', 1915, as well as later collections such as 'Cornhuskers', 1918, 'Smoke and Steel', 1920, and 'Slabs of the Sunburnt West', 1922, are the basis of the *Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg*, edited by Rebecca West (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1926. There is a biography by Karl W. Detzer: *Carl Sandburg, a Study in Personality and Background*, New York, 1941. See also *Carl Sandburg: Complete Poems* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1950.

There is, therefore, a particular power in the poems that are expressly written on such themes as 'Always the Mob',<sup>1</sup> 'Work Gangs',<sup>2</sup> and 'The Sins of Kalamazoo',<sup>3</sup> the latter being an evocation of the totality of the social and moral aspects of an American small town. Very often, though, Sandburg's strong social consciousness makes him emphasize the fate of the poor as compared with the rich and powerful, who, however, appear to be by no means the happier for their wealth. This is the case in 'The Mayor of Gary',<sup>4</sup> in 'Muckers',<sup>5</sup> and in an especially direct and strong appeal in 'A Fence',<sup>6</sup> which ends with the line,

"Passing through the bars and over the steel points will go  
nothing except Death and the Rain and Tomorrow."

It is not surprising that the aspects of nature that appear in Sandburg's poetry are, as a rule, for better or worse, connected with the activities of man. The poems 'Prairie',<sup>7</sup> 'Smoke and Steel',<sup>8</sup> expressing both the greatness and the crushing effect of agricultural and industrial America, and even very short ones, such as 'The Harbour',<sup>9</sup> are telling instances of the kind. Sometimes there is an almost speculative and mystical note, as in 'Slabs of the Sunburnt West',<sup>10</sup> which testifies to the breadth of Sandburg's conceptions, and sometimes that peculiar hush arising from one single, powerful image, as in the famous six lines of the poem 'Fog',<sup>11</sup>

"The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbour and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on."

If there is occasionally, although not often, that tone of bitter-

<sup>1</sup>See *Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg*, edited by Rebecca West (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1926, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 152.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 177.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 46.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 162.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p. 75.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.* p. 280.

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.* p. 64. From *Chicago Poems* by Carl Sandburg. Copyright, 1916, by Henry Holt and Company, Inc. Copyright, 1944, by Carl Sandburg. Used by permission of the publishers.

ness which is inseparable from a basic attitude like Sandburg's, there is also enough room for humour to round off the picture. This becomes especially clear in the collection *The People, Yes* (1936), the title of which is characteristic both of the contents and the tone of the volume. It is a jubilant statement of assent on the immense diversity of aspects of the American population, from the myth of the babel of languages to the belief that "man will yet win", from the story of the rich man's suicide to the theme of the position of the unemployed, from jokes about ancestors to ordinary yarns as "of the man so tall he must climb a ladder to shave himself".<sup>1</sup>

In the variety of themes the work is only equalled by Sandburg's own book *The American Songbag* (1927), a magnificent and highly successful effort at collecting American folk-songs together with their tunes. It is an achievement not nearly enough known in Europe, which is all the more to be regretted because it reveals a tradition far more genuine than that of the more popular and often sentimental nostalgia for pioneer days. There is a true antiquarian interest in the book, which could only have originated in an attitude of profound affinity with the dreams, the laughter and tears of the people, and if awareness of reality was ever coupled with the most honest and authentic love of American tradition, it is here. No wonder that Sandburg has also become one of the most outstanding biographers of Abraham Lincoln.<sup>2</sup>

Though it is—chiefly for reasons of style—not usual to connect Carl Sandburg with HART CRANE (1899–1932), the two poets have a number of essential qualities in common that unite them more closely, perhaps, than any other two modern poets. Like Sandburg, Crane is concerned with a vision of the fundamentals of America, past and present; like Sandburg, he wishes to accept the reality of the machine age, and is indebted to Walt Whitman, in whom he believes as a leader. In tone, however, Hart Crane differs profoundly from the older poet and this difference appears already in the way in which the two writers arrive at their respective positions.

<sup>1</sup>Carl Sandburg: *The People, Yes* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1936, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Sandburg: *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, 2 vols., 1926, and *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols., 1939.

For Sandburg, the reality of America is a natural and, in a way, an absolute value with which the poet, as it were, appears to have been growing up. Crane, on the other hand, had to discover this reality, through a process that led him away from his original adherence to the French symbolists, and sometimes one is not quite certain whether he would not have remained happier in that camp. Of this earlier attitude, his first book of verse *White Buildings* (1926)<sup>1</sup> gives ample evidence, and a definite predilection for synaesthesia, that is the constant interchange of images referring to different sense impressions, remained with him to the end of his brief and tragic life.<sup>2</sup> The mere fact that with Crane the acceptance of American reality is not a matter of course, but an intellectual effort, accounts very largely for the highly complex character of his mode of expression.

There is sometimes a rather laboured effect in his style, as if he had to convince himself of the necessity to say things exactly in the way he does, and as the span of his own experience of American life is much smaller than that of Sandburg, the whole picture becomes less consistent though, in part, more exciting. *The Bridge*, both as the title of a group of poems and as a symbol of the quest for an inward connection between man and the world, indicates the nature of Crane's effort and achievement. It opens with an evocation of Brooklyn Bridge<sup>3</sup> seen in the context of time and of

“ . . . the traffic lights that skim thy swift  
Unfractioned idiom”.

It puts the past into the present in a vision of Columbus, of Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas, of Rip Van Winkle, of Walt Whitman, and of Poe; it changes the river into a steel river running from coast to coast, it alludes to the movement of the early settlers, it transforms a dance into the dynamics of a

<sup>1</sup>'White Buildings' is now included in *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, edited with an introduction by Waldo Frank (Liveright Publishing Corporation), New York, 1933.

<sup>2</sup>See Philip Horton: *Hart Crane: the Life of an American Poet*, New York, 1937; Brom Weber: *Hart Crane*, New York, 1948; and the extremely instructive essay 'Hart Crane' by Allen Tate, *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, New York, 1936.

<sup>3</sup>*The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, edited with an introduction by Waldo Frank (Liveright Publishing Corporation), New York, 1933, p. 14.

nation, it takes up the theme of passionate desire, and just before the end, it reaches its climax in 'The Tunnel', perhaps the most striking synthesis of an impression of a New York subway with its deeper significance as an image of modern life.

Hart Crane is a characteristic example of what will happen to a poetic talent of the highest promise if it is faced with the ordeal of choosing between the ivory tower of symbolist aestheticism and the vast, hard reality of modern American life. Crane courageously decided in favour of the latter; but in the end it proved to be so much harder than he could ever hope to be himself, that he gave up the struggle in despair. On his journey home from Mexico, where he had spent a year, he committed suicide by leaping from the boat.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH (born 1892), on the other hand, appears to have had no difficulties in his gradual acceptance of the general problems of the age. It would, of course, be inaccurate to say that he succeeded where Crane failed, for his method is different, but in their efforts to understand and interpret the American situation after going through a more egocentric phase of expression, the two poets are somewhat alike. MacLeish's talent in adjusting himself to changing conditions betrays a soundness of constitution that no pragmatist will hesitate to admire, and what is more important, the sincerity of those changes cannot be doubted. He has always accepted the challenge, even if there might have been a grain of treachery in it—much as Hamlet in his poem 'The Hamlet of A. MacLeish' (1928) concludes his dramatic monologue<sup>1</sup> of doubts and despair with the words,

"It is time we should accept. . ."

This poem is, moreover, characteristic of the way in which MacLeish ever discovers new source material for what he has to say; it illustrates, too, how from the beginning he commands a scale of differentiated values often transcending a mere acceptance of reality. He actually appears to draw strength from the range of problems and possibilities before him, which may

<sup>1</sup>This poem is now included in the collection entitled *Archibald MacLeish. Poems: 1924-1933* (Houghton Mifflin Company), Boston and New York, (The Riverside Press), Cambridge, 1933, pp. 3-32.

be the reason why his versatility seems perfectly natural.

In fact, one of his best known and most impressive poems, 'You, Andrew Marvell',<sup>1</sup> owes its atmosphere of approaching night, exotic lull and infinite space to his capacity for making use of traditional literary values, and so does 'Immortal Autumn'.<sup>2</sup> There seems to be a big step from these poems to those dealing with aspects of the American scene, but the link is found in the poet's attempt to take up themes and ideas that connect a specific subject matter with the general problem of the modern world. Such is the case of the poems 'Einstein',<sup>3</sup> 'Sentiments for a Dedication'<sup>4</sup> and 'Invocation to the Social Muse',<sup>5</sup> the latter being a careful consideration of the question to what degree a poet should or could participate actively in social issues.

But the most interesting and striking example of this aspect of the poet's achievement is the poem '1933',<sup>6</sup> which makes use of the classical motive of Elpenor speaking to Ulysses as a shadow from Hades, and imploring him to arrange for the burial of his body. This is subtly changed into a symbol of the quest for a way out of a deadly crisis and of a belief in the explorer's intelligence and energy, and his delight in original and simple yet new values. This is already an obvious though oblique reference to the situation of the intellectual in the period of the economic depression in the '30s, and thus leads to that group of poems in which MacLeish is directly concerned with the American situation.

There is the peculiar mixture of half-serious and half-ironical praise (not unlike Sandburg's) in '. . . & Forty-Second Street',<sup>7</sup> there is the satirical touch about the literary situation in 'Critical Observations'<sup>8</sup> ("Let us await the great American novel"), and there is the nostalgia of the American intellectual who accepts his surroundings and yet dreams of other civilizations, knowing that "The wind blows from the east" and that "It is a strange thing—to be an American" ('American Letter').<sup>9</sup> Something of a summary of the essence of American life is attempted in the six poems entitled 'Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City . . .',<sup>10</sup> which refer to the character of the American

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 124.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 166.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.* p. 171.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p. 80.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p. 161.



continent, to the Indian past, to the mixed races that built up modern industry, to the artists who turn away from their native country, to the representatives of big business seen against the background of the free and open spaces a century ago, and to the change that comes over the immigrants confronted with radical slogans.

In all this, there is a sense of the dramatic arising from an awareness of the impact of exciting actuality on given situations, and it is therefore not surprising that MacLeish is one of the few modern poets who has also been successful as a writer of verse plays for radio, of which 'The Fall of the City'<sup>1</sup> (1937) is the best known. It deals with the surrender of the population of a city that considers itself masterless, to a dictator, though the latter is nothing but mere emptiness. The purpose of the play is obviously to convey a grave warning that freedom is more easily lost through carelessness and lack of insight, than through attacks from outside forces. A poet who can thus put his talent at the disposal of one of the great causes of our time, has evidently found a remarkable balance between the claims of the present world and his own vision.<sup>2</sup>

MacLeish is a link in the chain that connects the attitude of those writers that are mainly concerned with the adjustment of man to the outside world and those that are engrossed in the question 'What is Man?' As in fiction, there is a further link between the two attitudes in that kind of poetry which is concerned with the quest for tradition, or, as a variation, with the destiny of the American man seen in historical contexts. Both with Hart Crane and Archibald MacLeish, as well as with Sandburg, themes of that kind are not infrequent but they are invariably connected with more general ideas. There is a parallel here with the history of period fiction, for there are actually very few poets who have produced anything outstanding in this field, and even the one who has outwardly been most successful in these attempts, has not always received

<sup>1</sup>'The Fall of the City' is included in *Modern American Poetry. A Critical Anthology*, edited by Louis Untermeyer (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1942, pp. 516-534.

<sup>2</sup>This is particularly evident in his essays, especially in *A Time to Speak: the Selected Prose of Archibald MacLeish*, Boston, 1941, and in *A Time to Act: Selected Addresses*, Boston, 1943.

praise. Thus *John Brown's Body* (1928) by Stephen Vincent Benét (1898–1943) is at least a vigorous epic of the Civil War, trying to do justice to the human element on both sides, though it may not probe very deeply into the more vexing aspects of the whole problem.

Far more creative energy, however, has gone into that kind of poetry which takes its inspiration more or less directly from the fundamental question 'What is Man?' Again, as in the case of philosophy and fiction, the treatment of this question may either be predominantly though by no means exclusively psychological, as with Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Conrad Aiken; or more metempirical, that is, connecting the world of experience with a vision of, or a quest for, new values, as with Robinson Jeffers, Vachel Lindsay, and Robert Frost.

The writer who, more than anyone else, arrived at a powerful synthesis of the two approaches and achieved the most convincing and influential mode of expressing it as poet, dramatist and critic, is, of course, T. S. Eliot. If looked upon as an American, his work would have to be considered in this context; but it is evident that, in spite of American origin and inheritance, his place is equally well if not better defined within English thought and letters.

A strong element of psychological reflection in the quest for truth on the nature of man, coupled with an awareness of the diversity of American surroundings, is the basis for the *Spoon-River Anthology* (1915) by EDGAR LEE MASTERS (born 1869). The book has found its place in the development of modern American poetry, though it may well remain the only one that will carry the name of its author into later generations.<sup>1</sup> It is really an extraordinary achievement, considering the time when it was produced. In well over two hundred short poems that are partly interrelated, the author presents an astonishingly complete picture of the lives of the inhabitants of a Middle Western small town. The technique of presenting these lives

<sup>1</sup>Conrad Aiken in his *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (The Modern Library, Random House), New York, 1944, gives specimens of fifty-five different American poets but omits Edgar Lee Masters.

in the shape of imaginary inscriptions on tombstones necessitates concentration and brevity of expression on the one hand, and creates the opportunity for speculation on the fundamentals of human existence on the other. The wealth of subject material and of ideas and moods is thus subordinated to a principle of order that appears as unobtrusive as it is natural and safe.

The author himself pointed out a further principle of structure in so far as "The fools, the drunkards, and the failures came first, the people of one birth mind got second place, and the heroes and the enlightened spirits came last, a sort of Divine Comedy. . . ." <sup>1</sup> This second maxim, however, is not strictly adhered to—fortunately, one is inclined to add, for the very absence of any too-evident compositive rule adds to the charm of the whole. What Masters is obviously most concerned about is the problem of the discrepancy between appearance and reality in the life of man, and the difficulty of arriving at the truth about 'the real character' of a person. Some of the most striking poems are based on this conception and very often the author chooses the psychological approach to interpret the enigma of life.

Such is the case with the four poems dealing with the Pantier family: Benjamin Pantier, the attorney-at-law, believes his aspirations to be crippled by his wife and is buried with his dog, Mrs. Pantier explains her apparent cruelty towards her husband by her physical disgust for him, Reuben Pantier, the son, dissipates his life and yet cannot forget his attachment to his former teacher, Emily Sparks, who in her turn concentrates all her lost love and hopes on the boy who ran away.

Or there is the McNeely group, with a father who is outwardly successful and rich but whose family goes literally to pieces, one daughter being deserted by her lover who in his turn has become the victim of a harlot. The metaphysical element becomes stronger towards the end where the different characters are worried about values of the spirit. There is the village atheist <sup>2</sup> who arrives at the conclusion that

<sup>1</sup>Edgar Lee Masters: 'The Genesis of Spoon River' in *The American Mercury*, Vol. 28, January 1933, pp. 38-55.

<sup>2</sup>Edgar Lee Masters: *Spoon River Anthology: New Edition with New Poems* (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1941, p. 249.

"Immortality is not a gift,  
Immortality is an achievement".

There is the man who curses God for his suffering and discovers that he may come nearer the secret of things by cherishing a love for them; there is Elijah Browning with his vision of 'infinite truth', and finally there is Webster Ford,<sup>1</sup> who believes in Delphic Apollo and knows his choice

"'Twixt death in the flame and death after years of sorrow".

It would not be easy to select from all the values appearing in *Spoon River Anthology* those that the poet himself definitely believes in, but the acceptance of the multiplicity of human creeds and behaviour is in itself an attitude based on a profound sympathy for the fate of man.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON (1869-1935), though similarly engaged on the study of the nature and destiny of man, appears to betray a certain aloofness in his fundamental beliefs, if this is not a result of his preference for carefully handled traditional forms of poetic expression. In this respect, he is perhaps one of the most conservative writers of the present age, which does not mean to say that he is old-fashioned in what he has to say. On the contrary, his unending search for the meaning of individual lives and his exceedingly subtle analysis of human thought and emotions, particularly of the intricate kind, place him at least as definitely in the twentieth as in the nineteenth century.

To strive for the right way and to seek the guiding light is perhaps not a very original conception, but the sincerity with which this value is set forth and the often powerful images in which it is clad provide enough background for the innumerable themes that can be developed on this basis. Whether it is a short poem like the early 'Credo' (in the collection 'Children of the Night', 1890-7),<sup>2</sup> or a narrative like 'Lancelot' (1920), the

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 270.

<sup>2</sup>*Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Macmillan Company), New York, 1940. This collection contains all the poems referred to in the present study. See also Yvor Winters: *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, New York, 1947, and Estelle Kaplan, *Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, New York, 1940.

theme of making the right decision in a critical moment is always there. Sometimes it appears in the form of a universal symbol as, for instance, in the famous poem 'The Man Against the Sky' (1916), in which the poet gives his reflections on the appearance of the man between him and the sunset. "Dark, marvellous and inscrutable", indeed, remains the enigma of the fate of the individual to the poet, whether it means secret misery as in the case of 'Richard Cory' who is universally admired and yet puts an end to his life, or secret happiness as in 'Vickery's Mountain' in which the promise and illusion of wealth signify more than its actual realization. It is not surprising that on similar lines Robinson frequently attempts a kind of re-interpretation of real historical characters as, for instance, in the poems 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt', 'The Master' (Abraham Lincoln), 'George Crabbe', and 'Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford'. The last-mentioned poem in particular is an extraordinary achievement in its perfect blend of historical understanding and personal psychological interpretation of the relationship of one genius to another.

Of an even wider appeal is the treatment of the relationship of love, with all its complexities of physical and spiritual attraction and repulsion, its jealousies and cruelties, its deceptions and revelations, as in 'Eros Turannos', 'Rahel to Varnhagen' and the longer epic 'Talifer'. An interesting example of the inherent and everlasting power of basic symbols in this field, however old they may be, is to be found in Robinson's treatment of the subject material of the Arthurian legends, especially in his 'Lancelot' (1920) and 'Tristram' (1927). 'Tristram' in particular shows how much can be done by applying differentiated modern reflections to a medieval convention if sufficient tact is used. The relationship of Tristram to the two Isolts, as well as that of King Mark to Isolt of Ireland, is presented in a fashion that will convince most readers whether they do or do not know the medieval versions of the subject. The hesitating and uncertain attitude of King Mark after the murder of Tristram by Andred, for instance, is an accomplishment that would have called for the admiration of a Robert Browning, with whom Robinson, incidentally, has more than one trait in common.

Only once Robinson combined his search for the truth of

man with an attempt to interpret certain social realities of our age. This was done in 'King Jasper' (1935), his last poem, with a technique of symbols—if not allegories—that meant a new departure for the poet, although the idea that natural beauty and the natural element in man are the only lasting values in a world of industrial strife is quite in keeping with his earlier attitude. It is probably true to say that Robinson is the least typically American writer of the twentieth century. In fact, he could be imagined to be at home in almost any of the western countries. Perhaps this is the very reason why his work is so little known in Europe.

The poetry of CONRAD AIKEN (born 1889) seems at first sight to be based on a number of different attitudes not always consistent in themselves, but if one discounts the divergencies of momentary moods that are natural and often necessary in a poet, a few basic problems can easily be discerned. Aiken is, on the one hand, deeply immersed in the examination of the mind of man and the relationship of man and woman as lovers and, on the other, he finds himself in desperate search of an absolute certainty. This twofold engagement, together with a powerful imagination and a striking fluency of expression, makes for a wealth of subjects, tone and atmosphere that is hard to resist whatever reservations one may sometimes wish to make. Aiken's analysis of the complexities of a relationship between man and woman may be less subtle than that of Edwin Arlington Robinson, but the way in which such relationship is connected with associations of things, is quite as effective. A good instance is the sequence of poems entitled 'Priapus and the Pool' (1922),<sup>1</sup> especially the fourth poem, beginning,

"This is the shape of the leaf, and this of the flower".

But it is also to be found in the first piece of 'Discordants',<sup>2</sup> in 'The Quarrel',<sup>3</sup> 'At a Concert of Music',<sup>4</sup> and in some of

<sup>1</sup>'Priapus and the Pool' is included in *Selected Poems* by Conrad Aiken (Charles Scribner's Sons), New York, London, 1929, pp. 296 ff.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 1 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Untermeyer: *Modern American Poetry. A Critical Anthology* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), New York, 1942, p. 468.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 468-9.

the 'Preludes'. Sometimes this association is also made use of in poems devoted to the phenomenon of human consciousness alone, as for instance in 'Cloister':<sup>1</sup>

"Peace. The delicious silence throngs with ghosts  
Of wingèd sound and shadow. These are you."

It is inevitable that the problem of the love relationship should occasionally appear in connection with Aiken's quest for the absolute through moods of despair. It then serves as a means of forgetting the misery of the separateness of past memories in the inexorable sequence of time, as in 'Preludes to Attitude':<sup>2</sup>

"It is this instant  
When all is well with us: when hell and heaven  
Arch in a chord of glory over madness",

or in 'Preludes to Definition':<sup>3</sup>

"let us hurl our joy into another chaos, another wrath  
and make it love".

The nearest approach, however, to a full-length study of the abyss of the human mind and the relationship of the sexes by means of a re-interpretation of a generally known symbol, is to be found in 'Punch: the Immortal Liar' (1921).<sup>4</sup> The characters of the traditional Punch and Judy show not only appear as living persons in a realistic world, but they and their adventures are also seen from different angles, such as by two old men exchanging reminiscences, by Punch telling his own fantastic story, by Polly, who succeeds Judy, and by a narrator who relates the story of Punch's death. In this way, the incredible gasconading of Punch and his wickedness already appear in a new light and with a different accentuation. The decisive element, however, emerges in the second part of the poem

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 474.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted from *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, edited and with a preface by Conrad Aiken (The Modern Library, Random House), New York, 1944, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 240.

<sup>4</sup>Included in *Selected Poems*, pp. 189-246.

entitled 'Mountebank Carves his Puppets of Wood'. Here the 'reality' of the story is changed back into a fantasy of the wire-puller who re-creates the same events in his own way and gives the character another life of imaginary realities and dreams. In this way, the adventures of Punch and Judy, Polly and Jack Ketch, Sheba and her court, are transformed into something like a masque of archetypes, representing the ever-present fears and lusts of man, the attraction of evil and the force of imagination. The whole strikes the reader almost as a myth.

Aiken's concern with an absolute certainty assumes a great many different forms in his poetry. There is a slight touch of it set against the background of the life of the artist in the poem 'Senlin: a Biography' (1918),<sup>1</sup> and combined with a longing for love in 'And in the Hanging Gardens',<sup>2</sup> a poem rich with romantic imagery. It appears as

". . . human  
Endeavor fruitless in a world of pain"

in the symbol of the building of an endless road in the poem 'The Road'.<sup>3</sup> It is connected with a glimmer of hope after "the struggle of darkness against darkness" in 'The Room'<sup>4</sup> and with resignation after a despairing life-weariness in 'Tetélestai'.<sup>5</sup> There may be a sudden element of recklessness in it, as in 'One Star Fell and Another',<sup>6</sup> but most frequently there is a sense of utter hopelessness in his desperate attempt to come to grips with the metaphysical world. This is particularly evident in 'Preludes to Attitude',<sup>7</sup> in which the theme appears several times in different forms, but always with great force. Thus it is connected with the idea of death (I and V), with the experience of a terrible dream of the "abyss of Nothing" (II),<sup>8</sup> and with the conception of "the God who seeks his mother, Chaos" (IV).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Included in *Selected Poems*, pp. 162-188.

<sup>2</sup>Included in *Selected Poems*, p. 340.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 466.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 469 and *Selected Poems*, p. 159.

<sup>5</sup>Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 472.

<sup>7</sup>The Preludes mentioned in the text are included in Conrad Aiken's *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (The Modern Library, Random House), New York, 1944, pp. 224-236.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 225.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 462.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p. 229.



Though Aiken's attitude in its furious onslaught on the futility of life seems at times almost to border on nihilism, there is more than once a hint of how one has to imagine the solution to his vexing problem. It is most clearly stated in *Prelude III*,<sup>1</sup> and at the same time explains the endless struggle:

"It is to self yq' come,—  
And that is God. It is the seed of seeds:  
Seed for disastrous and immortal worlds."

The destiny of man lies with himself.

The most radical conception of human nature seems to be the one presented by ROBINSON JEFFERS (born 1887). There appears to be no limit to the cruelty, perversion, destruction and crime in the behaviour of his characters, and yet there is also in his poetry an intense awareness of the beauty of this world, which contrasts strangely with the infinite power of evil in man's existence. There is, of course, a deeper connection between the two extremes, in fact, they depend on each other in a way that leaves little doubt about the underlying principle. Jeffers's fundamental worry is the phenomenon of a human consciousness, of the very mind of man, and practically all the aspects of his work are functions of this one anxiety. It is the mind of man that gives everything a heightened intensity, be it nature or death, time or emotion, beauty or evil, and whatever theme Jeffers is taking up it is nearly always set against some opposing force.

Thus, in the poems in which Jeffers glorifies an aspect of natural beauty, he almost invariably strikes the chord of some vexing theme, such as the question whether his own existence and work will ever be remembered by others coming later, as in 'Post Mortem',<sup>2</sup> or the idea that he is incapable of expressing what he has to say, and must resign himself to praising the senses that perceive beauty, as in 'Love the Wild Swan'.<sup>3</sup> Or he may abruptly emphasize that all the beauty of the world will go on existing after human consciousness has disappeared, as

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>See *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Random House), New York, 1937, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, p. 573.

in 'Credo',<sup>1</sup> and in 'To the Stone-Cutters'.<sup>2</sup> He may suddenly be afraid of the beauty of dreams and find that

"A stone is a better pillow than many visions"

('Clouds of Evening'),<sup>3</sup> or he may feel overwhelmed by the enigmatic light of a pitiless God, as in 'Noon'.<sup>4</sup> Only occasionally there is an unconditional assent to the beauty of things, as in 'Compensation'<sup>5</sup> and 'Night',<sup>6</sup> or in 'Divinely Superfluous Beauty',<sup>7</sup> where, however, the very formulation of the title implies his suspicion of the Absolute. This suspicion may assume the shape of an awful certainty about the one and only cause in an utterly negative interpretation as in 'Birth-Dues':<sup>8</sup>

"The world's God is treacherous and full of unreason; a  
torturer, but also  
The only foundation and the only fountain."

A statement of this kind may well be taken as the link between Jeffers's consciousness of the beauty of nature and of the evil that has come into existence with the creation of the mind of man. There is logic, poetic logic at least, in Jeffers's attempt to come to grips with the origin of evil by conjuring up its weirdest aspects. It is like the ritual of exorcism, beginning with a statement of the case and ending in hectic rites of black magic and in escapes into other worlds. The four poems 'Apology for Bad Dreams'<sup>9</sup> give evidence both of Jeffers's ever-present awareness of the beauty of things and of his clearly defined plan:

"Better invent than suffer: imagine victims  
Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you  
Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place. . . ."

The victims that Jeffers imagines are those appearing in the three verse narratives 'Tamar' (1924), 'The Women at Point

<sup>1</sup>See Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 412.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 408.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 408.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 407.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 405.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 413.

<sup>7</sup>*The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Random House), New York, 1937, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 262.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p. 174.

Sur' (1927) and 'Cawdor' (1928) (a trilogy that might well be called 'The Critique of Pure Evil') and to a lesser extent in 'Thurso's Landing' (1932). Passion and lust, rape and incest, murder and suicide, together with strange 'awakenings' and psychic visions, form the subject matter of these verse narratives. It is true that the horrors committed never go unpunished, and though this balance is far from the usual moral order, it probably helps the reader to be patient enough to ponder over the other ideas even if he is unwilling to accept them. One of the most important of them is expressed in Tamar's words:<sup>1</sup>

". . . we must keep sin pure  
Or it will poison us, the grain of goodness in a sin is poison."

There is a kind of satanic grandeur in this conception, terrifying as it may be in its radical one-sidedness, just as there is some sort of infernal joy in a statement like this:

"You cannot think what freedom and what pleasure live in  
having abjured laws, in having  
Annulled hope, I am now at peace."<sup>2</sup>

In view of what happened in the Second World War, such an attitude is not without its fearful significance, and actually Jeffers was aware of its immediate bearings on the events of 1940, as his poem 'May-June, 1940'<sup>3</sup> plainly shows. A strong touch of cultural eschatology is, of course, entirely in keeping with this attitude and appears in poems like 'Prescription of Painful Ends'<sup>4</sup> and 'Shine, Perishing Republic'.<sup>5</sup>

Plunging into absolute negation is, however, not the only escape from the terror of human consciousness—which, by the way, causes the author to fear for his own sanity, as in the poem 'Ante Mortem'.<sup>6</sup> There is also the way out to animal nature, as in the verse narrative 'Roan Stallion' (1925), in which a young woman finds a transitory kind of fulfilment in her attachment to a beautiful stallion, although the end here, too, is death and despair. But above all, there is the idea of oblivion

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 40

<sup>2</sup>Untermeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 416.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 415.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 406.

determined by his belief in the beauty of the exotic and in the strength of a naive religion as well as by an admiration for what might be called neglected greatness. It is not easy to find the common denominator to these ideas, unless it is a secret and romantic love for whatever is apt to be underestimated by the average modern intellectual.

In this respect, the poem entitled 'The Chinese Nightingale (A Song in Chinese Tapestries)' (1917)<sup>1</sup> is perhaps the most impressive instance of his attitude, not only because of its subject, but also for its rich but disciplined imagery. It embodies the theme of the unknown and unexpected value in the character of the Chinese laundryman, and, in the visions produced by the lighting of a joss stick and the singing of the nightingale, Lindsay unites it with a sense of joy in the exotic and the fantastic as well as with some sort of religious insight in the understanding of sorrow, love, and glory.

On the whole, however, it is generally one of the three elements that pervades a poem and lends it the quality for which Lindsay's work has become popular. Thus, the subject of concealed or neglected greatness appears in 'In Praise of Johnny Appleseed'<sup>2</sup> and in 'The Apple-Barrel of Johnny Appleseed'<sup>3</sup> (two poems on the orchardist John Chapman), and in 'The Eagle That Is Forgotten',<sup>4</sup> which celebrates the memory of John Peter Altgeld's fight for justice. One poem is devoted to 'Nancy Hanks, Mother of Abraham Lincoln',<sup>5</sup> the girl "who slept in dust and sorrow", and another to the early and unknown days of the great statesman himself ('When Lincoln Came to Springfield').<sup>6</sup>

Greatness of simplicity is also one of the components in Lindsay's conception of the strength of naive religious beliefs. It appears as the dominant theme in the poem that brought him fame: 'General William Booth Enters into Heaven' (1913),<sup>7</sup> and it is obviously connected with a tone of mild and kindly irony betraying the author's scepticism on a deeper level. This is also the case in the poem 'A Negro Sermon:—Simon Legree'.<sup>8</sup> In conjunction with Lindsay's love of richness of

<sup>1</sup>See *Selected Poems of Vachel Lindsay*. Edited with an introduction by Hazelton Spencer (The Macmillan Company), New York, 1931, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 264.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.* p. 262.

<sup>5</sup>See Untermeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 271.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p. 270.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 267.

sound and rhythm, it naturally becomes most effective in those poems that make use of the exotic theme, of which the best known is 'The Congo (A Study of the Negro Race)',<sup>1</sup> dealing with 'Their Basic Savagery', 'Their Irrepressible High Spirits' and 'The Hope of Their Religion'. It is of little consequence in this connection whether Lindsay's interpretation of negro psychology is more or less right or wrong; the essential point is that his interpretation is dictated by a real though unsentimental sympathy with the religious attitude of the negroes.

The love of the exotic also appears, without the religious element but none the less with undiminished force, and as a symbol of creative imagination, in 'Aladdin and the Jinn'.<sup>2</sup> And in the poem 'The Ghosts of the Buffaloes'<sup>3</sup> it is linked with a vision of America's Indian past and the idea that

"Life is the west-going dream-storm's breath . . ."<sup>4</sup>

If the poetry of EZRA POUND (born 1885) could be treated as a colossal exercise in fantasy with no direct bearings on the issues of Western civilization there would probably be more consensus amongst critics in the evaluation of his work than is actually the case. But Pound drew the practical inferences of his own criticism of the Western world, acted upon them, and associated himself with the political enemies of that civilization, strangely unaware that the camp in which he found himself would have created much greater evils than those he was fighting against. The fatal error he committed makes it extremely difficult to arrive at a just estimate, not only of his ideas, but of his poetry in general, for however unbiased one may try to be in the interpretation of antagonistic spiritual forces, the alliance with brute force inevitably calls for the corresponding reaction. Most writers and thinkers, if they are of any importance, find themselves in pronounced opposition to a great many aspects of the civilization they live in—

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Included in *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, edited and with a preface by Conrad Aiken (The Modern Library, Random House), New York, 1944, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Untermeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>4</sup>See also Edgar Lee Masters: *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America*, New York, 1935.

especially in America—and they may fight with all their energies against whatever they think wrong. No one objects to that, but the line has to be drawn at a case such as this even if the motives were aesthetic ones.

For that is the starting point of Pound's attitude and explains a good deal of his development both as a poet and as a critic. If one looks at the earlier Pound, that is, the Pound before the 'Cantos', particularly at his poetry included in *Personae* (1926), it is obvious that the one value that he sincerely and permanently believes in is the principle of beauty as the experience of the moment—beauty, one might add, with Santayana's words, as "pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing". The poems that have gone into the current anthologies are almost invariably direct statements of this creed, and they belong to the gems of twentieth-century literature. 'Dance Figure',<sup>1</sup> 'Portrait d'une Femme',<sup>2</sup> 'A Virginal',<sup>3</sup> 'Greek Epigram',<sup>4</sup> and especially 'Envoi',<sup>5</sup> are well-known instances of this kind of writing. Occasionally Pound lays stress on the element of time in this experience, as in 'The Tomb at Akri Caar'<sup>6</sup> or in 'Apparuit'.<sup>7</sup>

There is already in some of his earlier poems a challenging tone betraying a belief in courage, if not arrogance, as essential values, as for instance in 'Ité'<sup>8</sup> where the poet emphasizes that he is looking for praise from the intolerant and the lovers of perfection, or in 'Ballad for Gloom'<sup>9</sup> with its playful agnosticism, or in 'Ballad of the Goodly Fere'<sup>10</sup> with the conception of Christ as a fighter. On the other hand, there are those poems in which the leading image lives, as it were, by itself, and creates, through what is left unsaid, a moment of suspense and mystery, as in 'A Girl',<sup>11</sup> 'Δωρία',<sup>12</sup> and 'The Return'.<sup>13</sup> But the leading conception remains the experience of beauty

<sup>1</sup>See *Personae. The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound*, including 'Ripostes', 'Lustra', 'Homage to Sextus Propertius', 'H. S. Mauberley' (Liveright Publishing Corporation: A New Directions Book), New York, 1926, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Included in L. Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 344.

<sup>5</sup>*Personae*, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>9</sup>Included in L. Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 343.

<sup>10</sup>*Personae*, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.* p. 60.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.* p. 95.

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.* p. 74.

through which the poet is convinced that he understands the meaning of life, as in the poem 'The Tree',<sup>1</sup> which opens the collection *Personae* with the lines:

"I stood still and was a tree amid the wood,  
Knowing the truth of things unseen before".

This, then, is another vital element of Pound's work and one with dangerous implications. Truth, according to this, is to be arrived at by intuition only, and as the poet is the sole judge of his own intuition, truth means Pound's truth. As long as this principle remains on the level of art as an expression of imagination, it is perfectly tenable. But as soon as it is carried into the field of social, political and economical facts, it becomes subject to verification by argument.

Pound's amazing learning has often been pointed out, but it is equally important to notice that he hardly ever refers to the one form of discipline which might have saved him from the utter miscalculation of his later development, namely the theory of knowledge. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that Pound is well aware of the limitations of language, and that he consciously tried to overcome the difficulties arising from these limitations by altering the method of poetic expression, of which more presently. There is obviously a connection between the early statement made by T. S. Eliot on Pound as a poet—that he was seldom interested in what Pound was saying, but only in the way he said it<sup>2</sup>—and a judgment like that of Fred B. Millett, who speaks of Pound's "colossal self-assurance and his conviction of his eternal rightness", and calls him "the most grossly egocentric of contemporary American critics".<sup>3</sup> Whether one does or does not accept such criticism, it means, in any case, that there are serious doubts about the contents of Pound's poetry and the rightness of his criticism.

And yet, there was a time when Pound seemed to take the different and more promising course of examining his own position within the world he really knew, and voicing it with power and subtlety. This he did in the sequence of poems

<sup>1</sup>*ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>See T. S. Eliot: 'Isolated Superiority' in *The Dial*, January 1928.

<sup>3</sup>Fred B. Millett, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

entitled 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)' (1920).<sup>1</sup> It is really another assertion of his belief in art and beauty as supreme values, but it is combined with a statement of the incredibly difficult position of the artist in modern civilization and of the disillusionment arising from this position, both in general and with special reference to the author's own self-knowledge. And in 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' (1917)<sup>2</sup> Pound achieves a synthesis of his fundamental belief in absolute art and his extraordinary understanding and knowledge of another civilization. But even in these two sequences of poems, the germs of his later decline can be discovered, for whatever Pound's development might have been in different circumstances, there is no doubt that the logic of his attitude is the same from beginning to end.

This attitude ultimately leads to dichotomy arising from an absolute arbitrariness of judgment and choice,<sup>3</sup> to negation as a principle in criticizing the present state of things in the West (except for a few constructive elements in literary criticism), and to the attempt at creating a virtually new instrument of poetic expression. Pound's earlier and later prose is largely determined by the first two of these aspects whilst his 'Cantos' testify to the existence of all three.

Arbitrariness of choice, dichotomy, and negation as a critical principle, are, of course, interrelated. One of the many contradictions to be found in Pound's critical work is that, on the one hand, he lashes out against those thinkers who argue in terms of alternatives, for instance, "as if the only alternative for monism were dualism",<sup>4</sup> whilst on the other hand he himself uses the very same method only with a different emphasis.

Brilliant as the formulation of his remarks in almost any field is, the feeling will persist that there is something fundamentally wrong with the whole manner. If a constructive element ever appears, it is in the attention he draws to certain

<sup>1</sup>Included in *Personae*. p. 185 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Included in *Personae*, p. 205 ff.

<sup>3</sup>See Harold H. Watts: 'Pound's Cantos: Means to an End' in *Yale Poetry Review*, 1947, No. 6, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ezra Pound: 'Dr. Williams' Position' in *Polite Essays* (Faber & Faber Ltd.), London, 1937, p. 74. Other critical prose includes *Make it New*, 1934, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, 1935, and *Culture*, 1938.



portions of world literature which he feels to be unduly neglected in general education, such as the Provençal Troubadours, Cavalcanti, and Villon, who, together with Chinese thought (especially Confucius) and poetry, Homer, Ovid, Dante, Voltaire, Stendhal, Flaubert, and the French symbolists, are his declared favourites.<sup>1</sup> But in his general criticism of the present age, especially in his attacks on 'the present accounting system'<sup>2</sup> and on "monetary infection",<sup>3</sup> there is little more than a smartly expressed indignation at the relationship between culture and money. In this respect, though he would scoff at the idea, Pound has a great deal in common with those pragmatists who think that by a change of the social system things could be fundamentally improved. But Pound does not indicate on what lines a new system should be run. He does not try to account for the decisive role that the nature of man, as such, may play in all the aspects he would like to see altered.

One of Pound's most interesting concerns is his attempt to create a new kind of language. It is not surprising that with his extraordinary knowledge of languages and with his power of handling words both as a poet and as a critic, he should develop a keen sense for the vexing problem of accuracy in expression, that is, expression as free from semantic confusion as possible. In the 'Cantos'<sup>4</sup> he offers a solution of this problem, connecting it with practically all his other worries, and the result is a product which will keep criticism busy for some time. As its most significant aspect is one of form and method, and not of contents or ideas, it does not yield much from the point of view of the present study, except in "reflecting the contemporary plight".<sup>5</sup>

Pound is one of those writers who (to adopt a phrase of T. S. Eliot) incorporates his erudition into his sensibility<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>1</sup>Ezra Pound 'How to Read' in *Polite Essays*, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>Ezra Pound: 'Abjection and Utter Farce' in *Polite Essays*, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>Ezra Pound: 'Mr Eliot's Solid Merit' in *Polite Essays*, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Ezra Pound: *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, 1930; *A Draft of Cantos XXXI-LXI* (Eleven New Cantos), 1934; *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, 1937; *Cantos LIII-LXXXI*, 1940; *The Pisan Cantos*, 1949; now collected in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (A New Directions Book), New York, 1948.

<sup>5</sup>See F. R. Leavis: *New Bearings in English Poetry. A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (Chatto & Windus), London, 1938, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted from Ezra Pound: 'Mr. Eliot's Solid Merit' in *Polite Essays*, p. 103.

uses it as a gigantic ideogram. For the Chinese ideogram is the means by which Pound tries to overcome the insoluble problem of an absolute language in the sense that a sign should be directly understood on the basis of its form, and with no reference to the general usage or habitual association. Hence the unending sequence of accumulated motives and quotations from all literatures, in a conversational tone. Hence the continual use of foreign languages, including Chinese. Hence the absence of any kind of logical structure in the traditional sense of the word, and the arbitrariness of the whole procedure. Hence also, the admiration of all those to whom the discovery of new means of expression is more important than thought, and the impression of failure he makes upon all others, even if they sympathize with the attempt as such.

To anyone with a perfect command of the spoken and written word of more than one language, the experiment is, of course, bound to appear unsuccessful. One of the essential aspects of poetry in any Western language is its dependence on the sounds and rhythm characteristic of that particular language, in short, on its phonology. The jumping from English to German, from Italian to French, from Latin to Greek and Chinese, may be quite entertaining, but it is utterly impossible if one thinks of poetry as something to be read aloud. The mere change from one basis of articulation to another is incompatible with the conception of poetry as it has existed anywhere in the Indo-European group of languages. Pound and his followers would not, of course, admit this as an objection, for the very nature of Pound's work is meant to be a "calculated assault on indurated modern sensibility: sensibility that an orderly attack (cultural histories, analyses of Western thought) leaves unaltered".<sup>1</sup>

This is a crucial point and explains the contradiction in the critical estimates of Pound's work. Those who are inwardly convinced that, in view of the present state of affairs in cultural activities, a change of the foundations of Western civilization is necessary, and hope that such a change will lead to a greater appreciation of the basic values of art, will look upon Pound as a positive force. Possibly their attitude will also be influenced by a feeling of disillusionment about the lost chances in the

<sup>1</sup>See Harold H. Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

cultural sphere after the Second World War. All the others, including those who appreciate the earlier poetry of Pound (that is, *Personae*) and share part of his indignation at the abuses of modern civilization, will reject the basic conceptions of his later development both in content and form, because they are aware that their acceptance involves a plunge into the dark that may result in destruction rather than in rebirth.<sup>1</sup>

With Ezra Pound we have entered the domain of that large group of poets whose work is certainly more interesting from the point of view of form and technique than in thought or attitude. Though it can only be mentioned here in brief it is naturally no less valuable as poetry. For innovations in form the group of the so-called imagists on both sides of the Atlantic did most to stress new possibilities in theory and practice on the basis of a definite programme set up in 1915 in the first of three collections entitled *Some Imagist Poets*. The most significant points of this programme were 'to make new rhythms', 'to present an image' and 'to produce poetry that is hard and clear'. Apart from Ezra Pound who belonged to the group, its most active member was Amy Lowell; but most consistent in the nature of her work was Hilda Doolittle ('H.D.'), who really showed up new ways of transforming single moments of experience into convincing, precise and concentrated images, whilst John Gould Fletcher, another member of the group, soon began his own quest for new values and for a new religious feeling. In spite of their organized attack on the more traditional kind of poetry the imagists were, in the long run, not able to supersede it, although they undoubtedly helped to pave the way for those who were keen on discovering new approaches to rhythm and imagery.

There were the voices speaking at the beginning of the century as, for example, Trumbull Stickney, who took up the

<sup>1</sup>See also Alice S. Amdur: *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, Cambridge, 1936. Richard P. Blackmur: *The Double Agent*, New York, 1935, p. 30 ff. Allen Tate: 'Ezra Pound' in *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, New York, 1936, p. 43 ff. T. S. Eliot: 'Ezra Pound in Poetry', No. 68, 1946, p. 326 ff. Robert A. Hume: 'The Contribution of Ezra Pound' in *English. The Magazine of the English Association*, Vol. VIII, No. 44, Summer 1950, pp. 60-5. Peter Russell (Editor): *Ezra Pound. A Collection of Essays to be Presented to Ezra Pound on his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, London, 1951. *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. by D. D. Paige, London, 1951.

themes of death and solitude as if he knew that his was to be a short journey in this world. There followed those whose technique remained in the traditional line like Sara Teasdale, Mark Van Doren, or more especially Witter Bynner who makes moods and small occurrences significant through strongly evocative elements, and Elinor Wylie with her inclination in tone and attitude towards seventeenth-century English poetry. A very moving change from aesthetic aloofness and its corresponding expression to the interpretation of the problem of the link between art and life can be noticed in the work of Wallace Stevens, whilst William Carlos Williams renders unobtrusive objects significant through the bare expressiveness of everyday language.

Outwardly experimental, but of meticulous care and highest discipline, especially in metrical matters, is the poetry of Marianne Moore. Her adventures in technique are perhaps only surpassed by E. E. Cummings whose work, however, reveals both the positive and the negative sides of that method and a preference for the themes of love and death. Edna St. Vincent Millay's early achievement in expressing a powerful consciousness of being alive has found a parallel in Muriel Rukeyser's poetry. That poets who are also literary critics will be particularly careful if not a little self-conscious in the formal aspects of their poetic work is borne out by the activities of the two Southern writers John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate as well as by Louis Untermeyer and Horace Gregory.

Promising forces amongst the younger generation are H. Phelps Putnam with a touch of what might be called mythical determinism, Léonie Adams and Delmore Schwartz with their heightened awareness of the problem of time, the negro poet Langston Hughes who has found new tones for expressing the negroes' social and spiritual position, and Karl Shapiro whose hard, clear and merciless imagery and symbols seize on the phenomena of modern life. Clearly there is no dearth of talent in this field.

## CHAPTER V

# THE GREAT CONFLICT: THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN DRAMA

### *The General Background*

It is generally agreed that the American drama has acquired an independent existence only since the end of the First World War. Its origin and rapid rise have often been described and interpreted chiefly in terms of the material conditions accompanying its development.<sup>1</sup> Though the present study is bound to attempt an interpretation on different lines, it will be well to begin with a brief summary of the most significant facts.

In the nineteenth century, the American stage had been dominated by plays of English and French origin, as well as by dramatic adaptations of well-known novels by such writers as Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy. The lighter type of entertainment generally prevailed. In the first decade of the twentieth century there are faint symptoms of attempted innovation in dramatic production, reflecting various problems of the age. Thus *Arizona* (1899) by Th. Augustus testifies to a heightened interest in local colour and history. Something like a psychological approach is attempted in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) by Clyde Fitch. Metaphysical subjects are superficially explored in *The Witching Hour* (1907) by Th. Augustus, and the social question appears in a play entitled *The Boss* (1911) by E. B. Sheldon. Though these plays give evidence of an almost flawless dramatic technique, they lack any depth of conception compared with what appeared twenty years later.

The material reasons for this state of affairs are not difficult to find. At the beginning of the century, theatres were run on

<sup>1</sup>The present chapter is, in part, based on an essay written by the author in the war years and published under the title '*Das moderne amerikanische Drama und seine gedanklichen Ursprünge*', in *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, April 1945, Zürich. An English translation made from the manuscript appeared in *English Studies*, Groningen (Holland), June 1944.

strictly commercial lines. Whenever possible, theatres in large cities produced no more than one play per season. The result was that any work, however faintly approaching experiment or social heresy, was rejected. Unlike England, America has never known an 'Ibsen epoch'. New elements and themes were not accepted unless carefully dosed and adapted to what was supposed to be the taste of the majority. The star system, entailing the obligation to write the title part of a play to suit one particular favourite actress or actor, was the final blow. And yet, these material conditions do not yield a really satisfactory explanation for the comparatively poor state of the early twentieth-century American drama. If they did, there would be no explanation for the new departure that came with the appearance in the year 1915 of the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players, who rebelled against the standards of the commercialized stage.

Although these companies, of which O'Neill was a member, had no definite programme, they succeeded in raising the drama to a higher artistic level. New themes, taken from the field of social problems and psychoanalysis, as well as novel styles related to expressionism and radical realism, were the outcome of this new departure. It is interesting to notice that 'Broadway', that is, the commercial theatre, did not hesitate to take up these trends as soon as they proved to be a paying proposition, and to stage some of the new plays. This clearly proves that it was not the commercial theatre which had fundamentally prevented an earlier rise of American drama, but something else. What followed was an increase in the number of provincial and small theatres in the '20s, which in its turn was succeeded by the foundation in 1935 of the 'Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration', Federal Theatre or W.P.A. Theatre for short. The W.P.A. Theatre was a direct result of the New Deal: it was subsidized by the Administration in order to find work for unemployed writers, actors, and stage hands, and to arrange cheap performances for the victims of the depression.

The dramatic production of this new phase was, of course, a distinct reflection of the social problems arising from the slump. Most prominent were plays with social and political and often socialistic tendencies, a popular feature being the

living newspaper, that is, scenic adaptations of current public affairs. Again it is significant that the commercial theatre was willing to include radical W.P.A. plays in its own repertoire. All this testifies to the vitality of the new drama. Mention must be made, however, of a certain retrograde process, which consists of the attempt of Hollywood producers to hire successful playwrights to write for the film exclusively.

So much for the material aspects of the development of the modern drama. As soon, however, as the basic attitudes of the modern American outlook are taken into consideration, the origin and rise of the drama appear in an entirely different light. From what has been discussed in the preceding chapters it is evident that the configuration of the spiritual forces was such as to create a kind of tension which an artist with a sense for the multiplicity of equally valid conceptions would inevitably experience as a tremendous conflict.

This conflict is roughly that between an outlook based on the acceptance of reality and one that looks for values beyond the world of experience. The former had found a full and systematic realization in the philosophies of pragmatism and determinism, and gained ascendancy in the public mind in the second decade of the twentieth century, whilst the latter existed in less tangible forms in poetry and fiction, and in the last offshoots of the old moral and religious tradition of the country. The very absence of any valid or influential philosophical competitor to pragmatism was bound to result in a change of the battleground from the field of philosophy into that of literature.

In addition to this, there were the minor conflicts within the two main opposing camps; pragmatism of the melioristic kind against psychological and economic determinism on the one hand, and traditional values against new conceptions of the destiny of man and the escape into pure imagination on the other. The decisive clash, however, is that between the acceptance of the power of reality and what might be called metaphysical perplexity. This clash could not have occurred in the gilded age before the First World War, because at that time the acceptance of the power of reality was the absolutely predominant outlook, and the revival of the quest for values beyond the empirical world had not yet begun in earnest.

Towards the end of the First World War, however, the new metempirical trends had gathered sufficient momentum to challenge the supremacy of the pragmatic outlook. It is evident that no literary medium is better suited to present the fatal conflict between fundamentally incompatible interpretations of life than the drama, and especially tragedy. (Thus, modern American tragedy becomes instrumental both in symbolizing the major issues of the age and in revolutionizing the drama in general. Hence also the need for experiments with its outer form and the restless search of the dramatists for new forms of expression.<sup>1</sup>)

The work of EUGENE O'NEILL (born 1888) is the most complete and powerful symbol of all these conflicts.<sup>2</sup> There is no other case in the history of American thought where we can find so evident a connection between a spiritual crisis in the general development of ideas and the arrival of a force expressing these conflicts unconsciously and yet embodying them in their most genuinely dramatic form. There may be arguments about who is the greatest living American poet, or novelist, or essayist, but the position of O'Neill as the leading American dramatist has never been seriously questioned. This is an almost unique occurrence in modern criticism and can only be explained by the fact that practically any approach to his art yields results of the first order which in its turn testifies to the wealth in scope, subject material, ideas and dramatic styles of his work. His very life appears as a violent struggle with

<sup>1</sup>Collections of modern American plays are:—Burns Mantle: *The Best Plays of 1920*, ff, New York, an annual issue. John Gassner: *Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, New York, 1939; Second Series, New York, 1947. Margaret G. Mayorga: *The Best One-Act Plays*, New York 1937, ff, an annual issue.

Books on the Modern American Drama include: Arthur H. Quinn: *A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day*, New York, 1943. Burns Mantle: *Contemporary American Playwrights*, New York, 1940 (with an index including the names of about 500 American dramatists). Joseph Wood Krutch: *The American Drama since 1918. An Informal History*, New York, 1939. Edmond M. Gagey: *Revolution in American Drama*, New York, 1947. Stark Young: *Immortal Shadows. A Book of Dramatic Criticism*, New York, 1948.

<sup>2</sup>*The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, complete in 3 volumes (Random House), New York, 1934 and 1941. *Nine Plays. . . . Selected by the Author* (The Modern Library, Random House), New York, 1941. *The Iceman Cometh* (Random House), New York, 1946.



various sorts of realities before he discovered his full vocation.

He was a student at Princeton, a gold digger, a seaman, an engineering draughtsman, an impresario, a reporter, and an actor. His health had to break down before he found himself. Painstakingly, he acquired the technique of the drama; in fact, he attended Professor G. P. Baker's famous Workshop Course No. 47 at Harvard University, and so to all intents and purposes received tuition in 'How to write plays'. He then joined the Provincetown Players. When success was assured, he withdrew from the limelight.

Equally divergent appears his spiritual itinerary. His political sympathies seemed at one time to be radical socialist; then anarchist, and another time of the kind that is dominated by a religious outlook bordering on Catholicism. His reading in dramatic literature ranges from Greek tragedy to Ibsen, Strindberg, and Georg Kaiser. Most puzzling, however, is the apparent diversity of his view-points when we turn to the plays themselves, quite apart from the wide range of subject matter treated therein and the widely differing modes of expression. A few brief, descriptive comments must suffice.

The play that first won O'Neill universal recognition was *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), the scene of which is a solitary American homestead. Its action results from a deterministic attitude and its style is realistic in the general sense of the word. *The Emperor Jones* (1920-1) taking for its setting the exotic atmosphere of the jungle, records the activities of a negro swindler and attempts to lay bare the buried strata of past generations in one individual. It has leanings towards a mystical interpretation of Freudian psychology and makes use of expressionistic elements. The intense heat of the stokehold of an ocean liner is the background on which the world of the stoker in *The Hairy Ape* (1922) is shattered by influences that lead to the hero's destruction through his bewildered instincts. Though the language is radically naturalistic, the scenery contains elements of strong symbolism. The New York slums appear together with the racial problem and a touch of religious resignation in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924). There follows a deterministic vision of a small New England farm in *Desire under the Elms* (1925), in which the dark, brooding powers of greed and desire bring death in their wake.

Though these earlier plays, in all their specific settings, characters, and clashes, contain a good deal of what might be called the general conflict within human nature, it is with the play entitled *The Great God Brown* (1926) that O'Neill began to shift his ground from individual to general symbols. Apart from introducing the use of masks as a means of representing the complex relationship of modern man to the outer world, he begins to assign his characters a more universal function. Thus, Billy Brown becomes the type of the conventional person who, though materially successful without being really creative, secretly yearns for the values of the creative artist. He is desperately in need of love, but gets it only in exchange for material values or by posing as an artist. The moment he tries to escape this dilemma, the crowd, that is, public opinion, will hunt him down.

Dion Anthony, on the other hand, is the type of the sensitive and creative man who would like to be his own natural self and give the world warmth and beauty, but cannot do so because he would be too deeply hurt by the cruelty of Brown's world. Until he breaks down under the strain to adjust himself to conventional life, he wears the mask of the crudely sensual person, with which he wins the love of Margaret, the conventional modern woman, who in her turn prefers the creative type of man to the outwardly successful one if the former appears in his sensual shape. She is really unable to distinguish between the real artist and the pseudo-artist, and feels happiest when she is united with the conventional type of man in his Bohemian pose. Cybel, finally, is the feminine and motherly principle in nature. Though secretly desired by every man, she is not appreciated in her true shape except by the creative and sensitive type, and she has to hide herself behind cheapness and sordidness to be able to fulfil her function.

From all this, it becomes clear that O'Neill sees man in an eminently tragic position, which boils down to this: if one follows the lines of convention one remains unproductive and unloved and will perish in an attempt to escape this sphere. If, on the other hand, one follows one's sensitive and creative instincts one will be misunderstood, and even tortured, by the world of conventions, and will equally perish in the attempt to adjust oneself to that world.

O'Neill did not, however, immediately follow up this theme, but continued expanding the possibilities of subject matter, fundamental conceptions, and dramatic style. Thus, in *Lazarus Laughed* (1927) he expresses the belief in the joy of living and the victory over death, and takes over the chorus from classical Greek drama. *Marco Millions* (1927-8) launches an attack on materialism in its crudest form and is sustained by a realistic interpretation of historic facts. *Strange Interlude* (1928) deals with a clinical case taken from psychopathology and attempts a psychoanalytical interpretation of life applying the aside as a device for making thought processes on the stage audible to the spectator alone.

Taken together, all this seems to point towards an almost incredible disparity in view-point. It is, however, this very disparity through which O'Neill's nature is clearly perceptible. He does not merely survey certain aspects of civilization but makes them part of his innermost experience. He is essentially the child of his own time, the highly sensitive artist whose inner being participates in the widespread spiritual disunion arising from one crucial dilemma. This is, in essence, the conflict between the primitive vital urge of instincts and desires on the one hand, and the promptings of moral or conventional norms fixed by tradition on the other. If man obeys his primitive impulses, the norms will bring about his ruin; if he follows the dictates of the norms, his repressed vital instincts will turn against him. An age-old truth reappears in the modern American's consciousness and creates the basis for what must needs be a tragic conflict.

This conflict has undoubtedly received its highest and fullest expression in the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The destruction of a New England family, through the effects of excessive love and hatred and by the desire to take the law into their own hands, is here presented in analogy to the tragic fate of the house of Atreus. On coming home from the war, Ezra Mannon, a judge and officer, is murdered by his wife Christine, who has a love affair with a Captain Grant. The daughter Lavinia, who is passionately fond of her father, induces her brother Orin to avenge the murder by killing the stranger. The mother, deeply devoted to her son and in despair about his deed, takes her own life. The son commits suicide,

after restlessly and vainly seeking peace. Lavinia, now left behind alone, renounces all social intercourse in order to dedicate the rest of her solitary days to the memory of the dead.

To this outline of events, everything else in atmosphere and further action is subordinated down to the minutest detail. The sub-rational aspect is emphasized by the quasi-incestuous love and morbid hatred of the Mannons, by the ferocious character of the Civil War, by Lavinia's hint that she has had a native lover, by an easy abandon in bearing and gesture displayed in the corresponding situations. The norms of traditional ethics on the other hand are underlined by Mannon being a judge, by the family being averse from appealing to the law of the country, by constant references to family tradition and history, by a stiffening in bearing—a mask-like blankness of expression evident at moments when the conventions have come into their own. The welter of vice and crime has exacted the fullest measure of expiation. The only survivor, though with her life wrecked, is Lavinia, for in spite of her undoubted complicity, she has acted from a desire for redress of justice. She has behaved in compliance with instinct as well as with the norms and is allowed to live, be it only in complete renunciation of that which makes life worth living. The smallest detail has a function subservient to the whole; for example, the talk of neighbours and servants is analogous to a chorus accompanying the action, a popular song is used as a kind of *leit-motiv*, the mention of the far-away island may be taken to symbolize the hope of escape into spheres of love without sin, and the report of Lincoln's death as ultimate defeat in victory.

So a number of most important contemporary attitudes towards life are reflected in this tragedy: the deterministic aspect in the uncontrolled human instincts, the pragmatic one in the (abortive) attempt to escape from the conflict to another sphere of existence, the quest for tradition in the material data underlying the events, and the metaphysical element in the issue of the clash. The same attitudes are discernible in O'Neill's other important works, though often with considerable shiftings of stress, especially in *The Hairy Ape* and *The Great God Brown*, where the doom of man is traceable to the same causes.

It is not surprising that O'Neill repeatedly tried to find a way out of this predicament. There is, for instance, a touch of pragmatic optimism in the idea of a possible adjustment to the claims of one's surroundings through love in *Anna Christie* (1922) and in *Ah, Wilderness* (1933). In this respect, the most sensational attempt is *Days Without End* (1934), in which the solution is based on the belief in the power of love and forgiveness, both in the personal and Christian sense of the word.

For a time it seemed as if O'Neill had definitely overcome the fundamental crisis of his earlier conflicts—at the cost, logically, of further dramatic production. For fully twelve years he remained silent. When in 1946, however, *The Iceman Cometh* appeared, it was evident that the crisis was still there, still accompanied by a powerful manifestation of the author's dramatic genius and as such even more subtly handled than before. Again, as in so many of his earlier plays, the setting is that of the destitute and outcast, who appear also as the central characters. But the action that develops in the bar-room of 'a cheap gin-mill' on the downtown West-side of New York, is one based on the irreconcilable contrast of man's yearning for a world of imaginary or even illusory values, and on his incapacity to cast off whatever weight pulls him in the other direction.

'Pipe Dreams' versus physical or spiritual conditioning, appears to be the essential issue, and the advance over the earlier plays is undoubtedly an even greater awareness of the incredible complexities of human desires. Some of the characters, each of which, by the way, has a clearly drawn individuality, are simply too weak to understand that they will never be happy if they can realize their pipe dreams only at the expense of their personal habits. Others, however, who are more clearly conscious of the issue at stake and their own situation in it, are touched in the fundamentals of their existence. That in all their consciousness they remain uncertain of the real nature of their own motives with regard to their terrible deeds, adds only to the effect of the whole. So Hickey, the hero of the crowd, can temporarily exercise his influence over the others in a way that actually makes them realize the nature of their pipe dreams and change their habits for a brief space of time. His fear of

his own weakness, however, is so strong that he literally kills his conscience, that is, he murders his wife, and goes to the electric chair. Parritt, the radical, who betrays his movement and is responsible for the imprisonment of his own mother, realizes that only death will relieve him of his guilt, and commits suicide. And Larry, the disillusioned radical who tries to imagine that he is only a philosophical onlooker, becomes aware that he is 'a real convert to death'.

It has justly been pointed out that in this play "the paradoxes of the deadly effect of truth and the life-giving power of illusion are driven home relentlessly".<sup>1</sup> In fact it elucidates another fundamental aspect of O'Neill's essentially tragic conception of human existence.

### *Pragmatists and Determinists*

If O'Neill's work is the fullest expression of the conflict of attitudes underlying modern American thought and feeling in general, it follows that a good deal of this is also likely to appear in the works of the other dramatists. Actually it is possible to distinguish the full scale of problems resulting from the different conflicting attitudes in practically all the outstanding plays of the period.

To begin with, it is obvious that a belief in the attainment of happiness through right acting or the correction of wrong concepts by experience (a basically pragmatic attitude) lends itself naturally to comedy. What in O'Neill's work is the least important element, becomes here the most significant one, for the process of adjustment to reality provides eminently suitable themes, especially for low-brow literature. As a matter of fact, nineteenth-century American comedy passes rather smoothly into that of today. It is not often that one meets with plays of any literary interest in this period, except possibly when an unusual situation is dealt with or when the definition of success and happiness assumes uncommon shades.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the theme of the adjustment to reality may be combined with the more

<sup>1</sup>See R. Stamm: 'A New Play by Eugene O'Neill' in *English Studies*, Groningen, Holland, October 1948, and by the same author: 'The Dramatic Experiment of Eugene O'Neill', *English Studies*, February, 1947. See also Barrett H. Clark: *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and his Plays*, revised edition, New York, 1947.

serious element of a conflict between a will to happiness and the reality of stereotyped social conventions.

A play belonging to the early years of the emancipation of the American drama and therefore of pioneering character, is *They Knew What They Wanted* (1924) by Sidney Howard. It is based on the reversal of the traditional idea of what goes with a happy marriage. A man who, by normal standards, would be justified in repudiating his wife for infidelity, acquires a deeper insight from an inner struggle and adopts the illegitimate child as his own, thereby also winning back the woman's love. This means that the existence and the happiness of three people are safeguarded and put on a new basis by subordinating, for once, the moral norm to the principle of expediency.

Much the same *motif*, with the same thought underlying it, is worked out in the play *Paris Bound* (1927) by Philip Barry. The setting, however, is that of higher social circles and there is no child to complicate matters. Whilst in Howard's play suspense is sustained in the straightening out of a situation that in the beginning appears hopelessly tangled, Barry presents the spectator with a kind of delayed climax. The problem is first envisaged as if it were entirely academic, so that the spectator is kept in suspense about the eventual reactions of the protagonist when complications begin in earnest. The final decision is all the more impressive, because at the most critical moment it is taken quietly and, as it were, intuitively.

On the whole, however, the plays based on a pragmatic solution of conflicts, successful as they may be from the box-office point of view, definitely belong to the sphere of lighter entertainment. Brilliant comedy of this sort, with an occasional serious touch, has been produced by S. N. Behrman, but the most typical instances are probably to be found in the plays of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, whose popular success testifies to the appetites of the public. As an example, mention may be made of the play *You Can't Take It With You* (1936). The date is not without its significance as the conception of happiness embodied in it is evidently influenced by slump-time experience. Contrary to current notions, the play clearly indicates that happiness does not necessarily mean money-making, but rather being able to do what one likes best. Harmless if mildly eccentric fancies in the way of hobbies and

irresponsible playfulness triumph over the mania for work and money. The grandfather's carefree wisdom and the inner freedom predominant in his simpler, though materially poorer, surroundings cause even the busy Wall Street financier to relax into greater forbearance. The interest in the play is chiefly sustained by the interaction of two different levels of pragmatic conduct and, of course, by scenes of rollicking fun.

A very different picture appears if the attitude underlying a play is based on the idea that reality is stronger than man. The radically deterministic conception that blind forces control the world in a chain of cause and effect and that man is powerless to break it has found expression on the stage as well as in the novel. It is, above all, responsible for the opening up of new subject matter of which psychoanalysis is perhaps the most important. In his eagerness for precise knowledge about the forces shaping reality, the determinist is ready to embrace any method that appears to promise the possibility of an exact interpretation of psychological processes. Represented in dramatic form, human destiny appears as something determined not only by outward tangible circumstances, but by the play of subconscious forces which are shown to be quite as relentless as those of outward reality.

Apart from some of O'Neill's plays, one of the early achievements in this field is *The Silver Cord* (1926) by Sidney Howard. In this play the excessive and selfish love of a mother for her sons appears to be fatal for their happiness. One of them sacrifices his beloved in order to avoid separation from his mother, whilst the other finds the necessary strength to resist the same fate, after becoming aware of the nature of his own psychological case. There is a pragmatic touch in this solution, but on the whole, the dramatic tension in the play is produced by the inter-play of the conscious and unconscious links of the characters. The author's sympathy is obviously with the rational elements in the behaviour of man.

Parallel to the situation in modern American fiction an unadulterated deterministic attitude is, as a rule, seldom found in modern plays, and if it is, the plays based on it tend to be sequences of more or less impressive scenes rather than complete units with a definable conflict. One of the best



instances of this kind is *Street Scene* (1929) by Elmer Rice, which deals with the fates of the inhabitants of a New York 'walk-up apartment house'. Parallel to the different events (love, requited and unrequited, jealousy, murder, arrest), chance passers-by function as symbols of the fortuity of individual destinies. The spectator's reaction to this kind of play is much the same as that produced by the reading of a naturalistic novel. What he experiences is a resigned sense of the inevitableness of events brought about by the blind power of chance. How closely the representation of such 'cuts' from life is related to the field of narrative literature can be seen from the fact that the play with the most spectacular success in this field, namely *Tobacco Road* (1933), is an adaptation made by Jack Kirkland from the novel by Erskine Caldwell.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting duality in thought and feeling arises when plays with an obviously deterministic basis direct an appeal to the spectator's pity and compassion, with a view to awakening his sense of social justice. This was frequently attempted in plays produced in the depression period, particularly in *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and in *Awake and Sing* (1935) by Clifford Odets, or in *Marching Song* (1937) by J. Howard Lawson. If these plays now appear curiously dated, it is probably not so much because the sociological situation has changed as because the conflicts have something mechanical, if not unreal, in their setting. This is a result of an unsolved contradiction in their basic attitude. The desire to stimulate sympathy with the cause of the workers in order to bring about a change for the better in social conditions, is coupled with a philosophy that really excludes belief in the power of that kind of sympathy.

It would be perfectly possible to write a play on that very theme, that is, on the conflict of these two fundamental conceptions of a social situation, but they are obviously an impediment if the author does not realize their incompatibility. This is where the plays of the depression period differ in quality and effect from the early muckraking novels of an Upton Sinclair, whose fight for social improvement is unmistakably humanitarian in origin. Still, the determinist drama, whether mainly descriptive or connected with social criticism, has powerfully

<sup>1</sup>Discussed on page 53 of this book.

contributed towards a greater awareness of stage effects within new subject material.

### *Period Elements*

Though impressive in quantity, the actual contribution of the historical drama, or rather, period drama, to the development of the modern American theatre, has been rather small. Since the late '30s, it has, of course, been very much in vogue as a result of the general quest for tradition so characteristic of the twentieth-century American attitude, but, parallel to the development of the period novel, little of lasting value seems to have been produced. There are plays with a strict regard for historical and biographical facts, as for instance *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938) by Robert Sherwood, a successfully dramatized chronicle of the early life of the statesman till his election as President. The underlying purpose, according to the writer's own admission, is to give an interpretation of what he calls the "solidification of the American idea". Whatever this may mean, it is obviously a non-rational value which, by the way, has also been called 'romantic'.

How popular the period element in theatrical productions is, can be seen from the tremendous success of musical comedies like *Oklahoma* and *Annie Get Your Gun* (1947). On the other hand, it is significant that the fashion for period novels and plays, as well as for the whole underlying attitude, has also been subject to satirical treatment. The farce *George Washington Slept Here* (1940) by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman is such an attempt to poke fun at the history fad, as well as at the back-to-the-land slogan, the accent being again positively pragmatic: only that which proves to be expedient and successful in everyday life can be called right.

Things are essentially different, however, where the historical apparatus is brought in as a device for presenting the fundamental modern conflict between a belief in tradition and current pragmatic notions. Such a clash is not only psychologically plausible, but full of inherent dramatic possibilities, and one of the best instances of it is to be found in *High Tar* (1936) by Maxwell Anderson.

With this author, we are entering a new field of dramatic

expression which, except for O'Neill's plays, is in principle distinct from what has been discussed under the tags of pragmatism and determinism. The difference consists in the fact that the plays mentioned so far are based on conflicts arising, not from fundamentally incompatible conceptions of life, but merely from different views concerning the best methods to obtain happiness or the solution of a given problem. The plays to be considered now are of an altogether different order. Their basic conflicts may emerge from a contest of values which, as a rule, exclude each other so radically that the struggle for the decision must needs lead to a vital change in the outlook of the persons concerned, or to the destruction of a human existence; or they may be primarily concerned with the nature of man and his destiny in the universe. In any case, however, they are vitally connected with problems that reach beyond the empirical world, and accordingly require an apparatus that frequently makes use of non-realistic devices.

MAXWELL ANDERSON (born 1888) once expressed the view that the theatre at its best is "an age-old rite restating and reassuring man's belief in his own destiny and his ultimate hope".<sup>1</sup> Actually, in most of his plays there is the question of the meaning of the existence of the hero and the problem of a decision touching upon metaphysical matter. In *Elizabeth the Queen* (1930), the Earl of Essex, realizing that his will to power is beyond his personal control, prefers death to receiving the crown from Elizabeth, because he feels that she will rule England better than he could. In *Winterset* (1935), a play based on the Sacco-Vanzetti case, it is the hero's passionate will to justice that after a long search makes him discover the real perpetrator of the crime for which his father had been sentenced to death. But though he can force the murderer into a confession, revenge is impossible because it is at cross purposes with his love for a girl whose brother belongs to the same gang of criminals as the murderer. Unable to escape the hopeless situation, the two lovers are killed.

If in these two plays the realization of a final value occurs

<sup>1</sup>Maxwell Anderson: *The Essence of Tragedy*, 1939, quoted from Edmond M. Gagey: *Revolution in American Drama* (Columbia University Press), New York, 1947, p. 76. Anderson's most important plays were published in the *Volume Eleven Verse Plays*, New York, 1940.

only at the cost of human lives, it does not, in other plays, exclude optimistic solutions. In *High Tor* (1936) we are presented with the inner conflict of a young man who is disillusioned by modern materialism and hopes to find peace and solace in the spirit of the past. He is even prepared to renounce love rather than make concessions in seeking adjustment to reality. In a nocturnal vision on the river Hudson he sees the shapes of the legendary Dutch seamen who were the first to sail up this river. This vision profoundly affects his outlook. In view of the distant past he is inclined towards a more lenient conception of the present and especially realizes that love also means understanding and toleration.

If it is a new perception of the past that thus influences an attitude toward the present, *The Star Waggon* (1937) uses a vision of the future to bring about a similar process in the lives of a middle-class family. The various characters in this play become aware that their dreams of success could only be realized at the expense of personal freedom in small matters. Though the basic attitude of the author is here closely akin to the pragmatic outlook, the surrender to a materially poorer reality with a view to remain free in one's decisions implies a triumph over the mass belief in material success. It is remarkable that, together with his awareness of the clash between material and non-material values, Maxwell Anderson also introduced new devices of style into his drama, especially the use of an irregular blank verse, sometimes strongly lyrical in character and alternating with the prose of boisterous comedy as in *High Tor*. It is one of the characteristics already mentioned in connection with O'Neill, that with the treatment of non-empirical conceptions, the drama also tends towards the use of unusual devices in language and setting.

### *Metaphysical Problems*

Of all the American writers, THORNTON WILDER (born 1897) is the one most intensely occupied with metaphysical problems. The fate and destiny of man as an individual and of the human race as a whole, the meaning of life, the mystery of the will of God, providence, and the existence of evil—all these themes appear time and again in his writings. Before he became known

as a dramatist, he had made a name for himself as a novelist especially with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), in which 'the destiny of five people, killed when the bridge breaks, appears as a five-fold question to providence. If the first chapter is entitled 'Perhaps an Accident' and the last one 'Perhaps an Intention', it indicates the result of the careful weighing of the evidence for or against a meaning in the catastrophe and in the relative fulfilment of the lives of the victims.

In *The Cabala* (1926) similar problems underlie the social activities of a group of powerful persons in modern Rome, and in the tale *The Woman of Andros* (1930) the questions concerning the divine will and a heavenly interregnum appear in the ideas of the Greeks at the time before the birth of Christ. In a totally different setting, the idea of action according to the highest moral principles is made the starting point for the adventures of a travelling salesman in modern America in *Heaven's My Destination* (1934). Here, the hero who unconsciously promises to arrange his life according to such principles gets into all sorts of difficulties. He quarrels with his friends, causes a run on a bank, because he withdraws his account for charitable purposes, puts up at a disreputable house without realizing where he is—in short, he finds himself in all sorts of ridiculous situations and is universally misunderstood. The attempt to act 'normally', that is, to compromise with the demands of everyday life, finally makes him ill, so that in the end he is very much where he was at the beginning: a simple travelling salesman with a hobby, though now richer in experience.

The novel *The Ides of March* (1947) again poses the old fundamental questions, but this time it is done in a more indirect way and with an incredibly cunning technique of imaginary letters, entries in diaries, and State documents referring to the life and rule of Julius Caesar and his Roman contemporaries. The metaphysical element is thus made to appear almost as incidental, but it is obvious that Caesar's remarks in his very first and in one of his last letters are something like an intellectual framework for the conception of the whole. He knows that after the pacification of the world something new has to be done that requires a knowledge of the aim of the average man. He says: "Man—what is that? What do w

now of him? His Gods, liberty, mind, love, destiny, death—what do these mean?"<sup>1</sup>

The events in the novel are very much like themes emerging from these questions, but at the end Caesar says: "Let me then banish from my mind the childish thought that it is among my duties to find some last answer concerning the nature of life." . . . "The universe is not aware that we are here." And finally: "Life has no meaning save that which we may confer upon it."<sup>2</sup> Though it would probably be going too far to assume that this is Wilder's own attitude, there is no doubt that the unending quest with all its ups and downs for some ultimate certainty and the fact that certainty is impossible, very largely lend his writings their specific quality.

This is especially the case with his dramatic work and it explains why one has to look for the particular expression of that quest rather than for a definite clash between two irreconcilable attitudes. At least, this is true of his two best known plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. In *Our Town* (1938) the questions concerning the purpose of human existence are put against the background of an American small town whose atmosphere is given with a peculiar power and a restraint chiefly obtained through the device of doing away with scenery and stage property, and of concentrating on words and gestures. Though there is no conflict, there is tension proceeding from the contrast between the consciousness of the timeless human experience of feeling, willing, living and dying, and the awareness of everyday routine. The will to live a life intense, however simple and uneventful in its outward aspects, springs from an acute realization of the mystery of its uniqueness.

With regard to the play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), discussion of the unusual stage devices has occasionally confused the fundamental issues rather than clarified them. The play is obviously about the destiny of man in general, and it is equally obvious that for a subject that, since the days of the moralities of the Middle Ages has been treated so often, a device new in principle is imperative. Wilder chiefly makes use of three contrivances.

<sup>1</sup>Thornton Wilder: *The Ides of March* (Harper & Bros.), New York, London, 1948, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Thornton Wilder, op. cit., p. 232.

First, there is the telescoping of different ages on one and the same time screen. The early history of mankind, the present, the future, and an age without any specific character, are projected into one. Thus, the hero of the play, Mr. Antrobus, works in an office in New York, but is also the inventor of the wheel and of the alphabet and he celebrates his five-thousandth wedding anniversary. A telegraph boy appears together with a mammoth and a dinosaur, and Mr. Antrobus's son Henry is once called Cain and another time wears the uniform of the Napoleonic army.

The second contrivance is the connection of individual occurrences of intentionally trivial character with mythological associations and generally accepted patterns of knowledge. Apart from the name Antrobus, there is a servant girl Sabina abducted by Mr. Antrobus from the Sabine hills and embodying both the need for everyday work and the emotional and temperamental aspect of woman who nevertheless knows exactly when to be practical. She stands in contrast to Mrs. Antrobus, who represents the motherly aspect of womanhood. Henry, the problem child, who is apt to do mischief with his sling, is once referred to as the emblem of evil that will invariably be present wherever there are human beings.

The third contrivance is the intentional breaking up of whatever may be left of stage illusions. Some of the actors protest against the play, others have to be replaced by the dressers and ushers of the theatre, and bits of the scenery keep getting into the actors' way.

• *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a modern everyman play. The Antrobus family are a symbol of the human race that time and again will narrowly escape all kinds of natural and self-willed calamities. It is mankind that from the beginning suffers from the heritage of sin and despair, but for ever attempts to rebuild the values it has destroyed. It is the family *per se*, with all their troubles, quarrels, and accidents, with their pride in what they have produced, their readiness to help those in distress, their inclination to fall victims to lust and power, their perplexity in the face of evil absolute, their belief in spiritual values and their courage ever to begin anew.

Seen from this angle, every little detail in the play appears to have its function. When, for instance, the family realize the

mischievous character of Henry, it is he himself who helps to lift the cloud from his parents by saying the multiplication tables. This is not only a typical occurrence in ordinary family life to overcome an embarrassing situation, but also a symbol for the fact that we are apt to become particularly busy in cultural work if something threatens to go wrong in our social and political life. Or, when some of the great truths in the history of human thought expressed by Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and the Book of Genesis, are repeatedly recited by stage hands and other substitutes because the actors happen to be ill, it clearly indicates not only the importance of these truths, but also the fact that everybody is entitled to benefit from them, especially when the official representatives of intellectual life have become too weak to do their work. As one of the few successful dramatic allegories of the present age, *The Skin of Our Teeth* opens up new possibilities for the modern theatre.<sup>1</sup>

### *Imagination and Reality*

One of the problems that several modern dramatists seem to be vitally interested in, is that of man's position between the realm of imagination and actual reality. This is natural, in view of the fact that conflicts between the two spheres are inevitable and that themes connected with this problem lend themselves easily to dramatic production. According to the authors' attitudes towards the problem, these themes may be widely different in character and the plays in power of presentation, since not every dramatist is capable of the depth and intensity of a play like O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, which evidently belongs to this group too.

An interesting and perhaps unique approach to the problem is taken by WILLIAM SAROYAN (born 1908), who began as a writer of short stories. It would not be quite correct to say that his is a conscious attempt to answer the question of how man's position between the two spheres has to be understood, but it is certain that his naivety in trying to reconcile the two worlds has a disarming, though not always convincing, touch about it.

<sup>1</sup>As evidence for the strong impression which experiments of that sort may make on the public it may be mentioned that, together with the dramatized version of Steinbeck's novel *The Moon is Down*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* was one of the greatest successes of the theatres of Switzerland during the war years.



Saroyan's secret is that he believes in the mood of the moment as something almost absolute, and whatever other statements he may have made, they are undoubtedly subordinate to that first principle, including even his belief in the brotherhood of man. The mood of the moment, however, is in his case invariably the blend of a personal experience and its reflection by an unusually imaginative mind. Evidence of this is, above all, to be found in the fact that his short stories are not so much narratives in the usual sense of the word as reproductions of particular situations; that, accordingly, his novels are sequences of such individual occurrences rather than fully developed tales, and that his plays frequently go without any definable plot, because they live by the appeal of single scenes.

Saroyan's outlook on life, especially his opinion of the nature of man, is so radically optimistic that one is occasionally inclined to doubt whether he is quite serious in it. But he is. Even in his first and perhaps best known collection of short stories entitled *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1934), this attitude prevails although the background of the depression period is occasionally grim enough. The title story, in particular, is a good instance of how Saroyan handles a situation: a young man, out of work, and with no money except one penny which he polishes until it shines brilliantly, spends the day in trying to find a job, finally realizing that "there is nothing to do but sleep" and "it is only in sleep that we may know we live". In other words, pleasure in apparently insignificant things, even in the most difficult circumstances, and escape from reality in order to be more intensely alive, are two vital elements in Saroyan's work. The two are, of course, interdependent, but the former is the one that appears almost always in a perfectly plausible manner, whereas the latter has a tendency to become literally incredible in its effects.

This is especially true of Saroyan's novel *The Human Comedy* (1943). As long as the events are directly connected with the mind of the telegraph messenger aged fourteen, they keep their specific charm. Episodes like those of the trap, the apricot tree, and the negro waving from the train, will be accepted at once, whilst those connected with the lives of the grown-ups, including the robbery of the telegraph office and the return of the soldier, appear as improbable flights into a

world of dreams too good to be true. It is by no means accidental that Saroyan appears to be at his best in stories dealing with the mind and world of growing-up children as, for instance, in *Little Children* (1937) and *My Name Is Aram* (1940).

Seen from this angle, his work as a dramatist will be more readily understood. What appears often as unlikely and sentimental in the stories is here changed into fantasy. Saroyan's plays are like dramatized fairy-tales without plots. With very few exceptions, his characters are inherently good, or at least thoroughly likable. They generally live in poverty, but delight in those little pleasures that change the drabness of everyday life into sheer loveliness. The most incredible things happen to them, but they, as well as the spectator, take them for granted. If there is sadness, it serves to enhance the beauty of some particular moment. In short, the conflict between reality and imagination is solved by the absolute supremacy of the world of fantasy transforming everyday life into a succession of dream-like moments of kindness and joy. In his first play, *My Heart's in the Highlands* (1939-40), the family of a poor poet are about to be turned out of their house, but their immanent peace and happiness is not fundamentally affected. To the newsboy there is the delight of ice-cream, to the little girl the beauty of the poet's rejected work, to the family the old actor's bugle solo and the generosity of the grocer. The spirit of the artist, whatever the poverty of circumstances, will triumph in the end.

• *The Time of Your Life* (1939-40) consists of a succession of scenes with various eccentric individuals casually meeting in a San Francisco water-front saloon. Though the play is less directly concerned with the artist's world (here represented by a dancer and a coloured pianist), it again represents the transformation of the less pleasant experiences of those individuals into moments of delight and fulfilment, mainly through the presence of a well-to-do, profoundly generous and wise customer. This time, Saroyan permits evil in the person of a degenerate police official to enter this harmless world and to hurt it. It is hardly more than an allusion to a clash, and the way in which the evil-doer's account is duly settled in the end confirms the absolute victory of imaginative kindness over cruelty.

The final consequence of this kind of attitude is the eventual escape into pure fantasy. Saroyan did not hesitate to take this step. In his collection of plays *The Beautiful People* (1941) there is one entitled 'Sweeney in the Trees' which, in many aspects, reminds one of the experiments of the surrealists. It has no discernible action, no logic in its dialogue, no tangible connection between events, characters, and setting. There is a character, Sweeney, and another called Sweeney Himself, there is a strange-looking tree in Sweeney's room that grows in the course of the play and in which Sweeney sometimes hides. There is a poet called Shakepierce, who suddenly dies, a music teacher, and two Japanese who do acrobatics. There is a telephone that is thrown out of the window, a telegram with not a single word in it, and, above all, there are rolls of bank-notes at first supposed to be not real and kicked about in the room by various characters until in the end they are discovered to be real.

All this is inexplicable. It does not seem to stand for anything, it is not an allegorical concept. And yet, one feels that it has meaning as a series of images, though only in a very general way. As all the various occurrences happen with no apparent interconnection, the single phenomenon stands out very strongly, in fact, so strongly, that one is tempted to take this as a major element of the play. The play obviously stresses what might be called the singularity of things, more particularly the uniqueness of each individual being and the separateness, if not loneliness, of each individual occurrence whether sad or pleasant, imaginary or real.

Since, however, one cannot apprehend an unlimited number of different successive yet unconnected phenomena, the element of reiteration is indispensable. On the other hand, the particular quality of a moment can be emphasized if it is contrasted with a quite different phenomenon (the acrobatics of the Japanese on the death of Shakepierce). The whole method is the ultimate consequence of a profound belief in the absolute importance of the mood of a moment. It is incompatible with any conception of the drama in the more traditional form, but like other experiments, it indicates new possibilities for the stage.

It is a remarkable fact that, since the end of the Second

World War, two of the more outstanding new playwrights, namely TENNESSEE WILLIAMS and ARTHUR MILLER, have been profoundly attracted by the conflict between imagination and reality, and that their most successful plays are evidently based on this theme. In *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) by Tennessee Williams (born 1914) three characters live in a world of illusions or hopes: the mother, who is attached to the glorious memories of her younger days in the South, the crippled girl, who has withdrawn into her own dreams symbolized in her menagerie of glass animals, and the son, who is looking for a life of adventures. But whilst mother and son are capable of adjusting themselves to a hard reality, the girl, when confronted with the possibility of carrying a bit of her dream into reality and realizing that she will fail, breaks down under the experience.

In *A Street-Car Named Desire* (1948) the contrast between the two spheres is made even more glaring. Of two sisters, one marries a workman and, in spite of occasionally very rough treatment from her husband, appears to be quite happy in her surroundings, chiefly on account of the physical attraction her husband has for her. She is an example of perfect adjustment to reality. Her sister, on the other hand, follows every kind of illusion in her life—wealth, luxury, social success, good connections, a genteel life, only to discover that she fails in every respect, partly because she puts her stakes too high, partly through bad luck, partly through a shock received in her first love, partly through lack of will-power in resisting the temptations of the flesh. Her unwillingness to distinguish between illusion and reality eventually drives her insane. The moral intention of the play is perhaps a little too obvious and too simple and there is a good deal of frank melodrama in it, but there is no doubt that Tennessee Williams knows how to work ideas into drama.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Miller (born 1916), who had already touched upon the related problem of truth as against the temptations of material success in *All My Sons* (1947), turned to a full interpretation of the conflict between the sphere of hopes and self-willed illusion and a merciless reality in the play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). But this time, the conflicting elements are

<sup>1</sup>Other writings by Tennessee Williams include a novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950), and a play *Rose Tatoo* (1950-1). •

much more complex in their nature and there is no direct moral issue at stake as, for instance, in *A Street-Car Named Desire*. There may be material reasons, like losing his job, for the suicide of the old travelling salesman, but more important for his catastrophe is the accumulation of doubts about his own methods to master life. By profession "riding on a smile and a shoe-shine",<sup>1</sup> he realizes in a number of visions of his earlier life how he has not only overrated the talent of his elder son, but also misjudged his character, how the value of being well-liked is not necessarily a safe one, and how his big words have only led to disastrous results. The interesting point of the play is that, in spite of the crash of all these dreams, sympathy is by no means supposed to go with the other side, that is, with those who have mastered reality like the hard-working young business man or the reckless successful adventurer. There is a deeper significance in the fact that a modern American audience is made to sympathize with characters who fail through living in a world of illusions.

It is at this point that gives the recent plays, together with *The Iceman Cometh*, their special position in modern American thought. They testify to a greater awareness in the public of both the attractions and dangers of what in its positive accent is called 'an ideal', and in its negative 'a pipe dream', and in view of what has happened with some of the great concepts since the end of the Second World War, they are also a reflection of that unending struggle between hope and disappointment, between what is desirable and what is possible, that on an incomparably larger scale is being fought in the Western world. And finally, they confirm the assumption that the rise of the American drama is closely connected with the spiritual crisis emerging from the clash of fundamentally incompatible concepts of life.

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman* (The Viking Press), New York, 1947, p. 138

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